



Better late than never

Duncan Skene considers 'good' taste and recommends classy late-flowering daylilies to beat *Hemerocallis* Gall Midge.

Fig. 1 'Curly Cinnamon Windmill'. I cannot commend this plant too highly – it is beyond compare. The good news is that several UK nurseries now offer it for sale.

A few years ago the engaging and perceptive artist Grayson Perry presented a series of television programmes about the relationship between taste and social class. Three programmes dealt with the 'lower orders', the middle class, and 'our betters'. Traditional simplistic class divisions, yes, but it worked here. Perry talked to people from different social strata (in anthropological terms, his 'informants') without prejudice and an open mind. No sneering, judgmental,

sideways looks at the camera for him. He seemed genuinely interested in finding out how tastes varied according to class, and where notions of taste come from.

The origins of taste have long interested me with regard to plants and gardens. Why do you, or I, approve of certain arrangements of beds and borders and not others? When did it become the norm to plant odds rather than evens? Who decided that a single row of tulip soldiers was naff? Why have we, for the most part,

concluded with orthodoxies regarding what is and isn't regarded as tasteful in gardening terms? Who are or were the arbiters of taste? Are the rest of us sheep?

I start by considering the wider questions about taste because people have such different opinions about daylilies. They're very good doers, so why aren't they more popular?

Having posed these questions, you might expect answers. Sorry to disappoint. Rather, I've started an article about *Hemerocallis*/daylilies with mention of bigger questions to do with taste because opinions and preferences about these plants differ so very markedly. Why aren't daylilies more popular when they're such

Daylilies (*Hemerocallis*)

Most are fully hardy. They may be evergreen or partly/fully deciduous

Height 20–200cm

Flowers 2–30cm diameter, colour – near white to near black, via yellow, orange, pink, red and purple

Flower pattern – eye, picotee, watermark

Flower texture – ruffling, shark tooth edging, sculpting

good does? It remains a mystery to me why my notions of taste, so clearly the 'right' ones, are not shared by one and all (tongue firmly in cheek – just in case you thought otherwise).

I had my Damascene moment with daylilies in the mid 1990s on my first visit to Apple Court in Hampshire, created by Diana Grenfell and Roger Grounds, and home then to National Collections of ferns, grasses and hostas as well as daylilies. I came across a flower that I described in my notebook as 'like an unzipped banana'. Not a romantic description, but I was in love. What on earth was this vision of loveliness? I learned later that I'd admired a spider daylily, whose chief characteristics are long narrow petals.

My attraction led to the gradual establishment of a sizeable collection. By the late 90s I was in a position to disseminate plant material via my small mail order nursery, Abraxas Gardens, which I ran until 2013. Because spider daylilies were little known in the UK, I assumed a proselytising mantle – the word needed to be spread! In



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Fig. 2 'Isabelle Rose'

addition to the small number of spiders I obtained from Diana, my early sources were Chris Searle in Canterbury and Jan and Andy Wyers (A La Carte Daylilies) on the Isle of Wight. I soon realised that to develop a comprehensive collection I'd also need to find sources in the USA, where daylilies seem as popular as roses are here, and where most recent breeding had taken place.

I was extremely fortunate that Clarence Crochet from Louisiana was my first

American supplier, sending me more spiders in my first consignment than I'd been able to acquire from all UK sources put together. If I'm asked to recommend just one spider daylily it is Clarence's 1998 introduction 'Curly Cinnamon Windmill' (fig. 1), the most extravagant plant purchase I'd ever made but, as luck would have it, an absolute star. CCW is a supremely elegant deciduous diploid with widely spaced yellow petals and sepals. The 'cinnamon' chevron pattern is most apparent in hot weather. The flower height is 70–85cm and the flowers themselves are large, 20–24cm across. CCW is well behaved, does not run, and increases at a moderate rate, so it's very garden worthy where an exotic touch is sought.

Daylily forms

Lily or trumpet form – lily profile

Full form – wider petals, often recurved, & flatter profiles

Spider – petals & sepals 4 times or more as long as their width

Unusual form (UFs, or even UFOs) – spidery petals with an additional decorative quirk such as pinching, quilled sepals or ringlet-like curling.



Fig. 3 'TNT' Perhaps you can see here why spidery daylilies are often compared to winged creatures from lacewings to pterodactyls.

Clarence asked me if I was planning a hybridisation programme? It had never occurred to me. We UK hardy planters might grow on the odd found seedling, wondering about its worthiness, but deliberate breeding just didn't figure – the preserve of the 'expert', surely? Well, apparently not so in the US. I soon learned there were masses of 'Mom and Pop' nurseries devoted to daylilies, most of them dabbling with dabbling pollen. When Chris Searle visited me later that year I asked him for a pollination demonstration ("just out of interest"). Fatal! Within a year I was hooked, and I've been making about thirty to forty crosses annually ever since.

What's in a name? Being ideologically opposed to the malign influence of multi-

national corporations, I really struggled a couple of years ago when at Marina Christopher's nursery I fell for *Sedum cauticola* 'Coca Cola'. In the event I bought it, but, silly though it may be, names *have* deterred me from buying some plants. You might think 'Curly Cinnamon Windmill' a bit daft, as I did,

Backyard breeders in the States are introducing named daylilies willy-nilly so there are now more than 50,000 registered cultivars. Mad, but does it matter? Of course, most will disappear without trace, thank goodness.

but you'll get over it. Some US breeders are clearly on another planet though. Could



Fig. 4 An example of a fuller daylily form with wider petals, 'El Desperado' is widely available in the UK at a budget price because it's been micropropagated.

you find space for 'Big Honking French Kisses', 'Slap Your Grandma', or 'Nekkid Woman on a Tractor'?

Questionable long names may simply be a function of the ridiculous number of daylilies registered every year. Better 'breaks' will gradually float to the surface for wider dispersal – perhaps initially garnering grass roots approval, to be followed by public recognition in society journals and eventually general gardening magazines. In recent times, for example, George Doorakian's 2007 introduction, 'Rose F. Kennedy', which improved on his 2004 'Emerald Starburst', rapidly gained widespread approval owing to the groundbreaking intensity of its broad, green centre.

Over 15 years I trialled around 700 named daylilies.

Most were good plants, but there was a lot of near duplication, so when I came to shed my collection last year I found only 35 I couldn't live without. One reason I was content to reduce my collection by 95% was that I'd succumbed to the lure of hybridisation. While successful breeding necessitates rigorous, dispassionate evaluation, hybridising is, nevertheless, great fun. Occasionally I found that plants I'd bred performed better than ones I'd bought.

I had quite often found that American plants, whose photographs and written descriptions promised much, delivered unreliable performance in our cooler climes. European breeders had had some success and a few of their plants were thriving in British gardens. If they could do it, what were we English hybridisers waiting for?

So we began to share thoughts and observations. Chris Searle and Jan & Andy Wyers were in the vanguard, with the likes of Robert Grant-Downton in Oxford, Pollie & Terry Maasz in Hampshire and Nicholas Peirce on the Isle of Wight hot on their heels. For my part, between 2007 and 2013 I named and introduced 21 daylilies, some of which, I hope, might one day find their way into non-specialists' gardens.



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Fig. 5 'Suzy Cream Cheese' shows not only good bud count but also excellent branching and spacing, thus avoiding any danger of congestion when the flowers open.

There's always a fly in the ointment. Having chosen to collect and breed daylilies, in part because they were so dauntless, robust and resilient (and, for me, toughness is as much an aesthetic consideration as a practical one) along came *Hemerocallis* Gall Midge. Bill Munson's classic 1989 book, *The Daylily*, makes no mention of this problem, but in *The Gardener's Guide To Growing Daylilies*, just nine years later, Diana Grenfell advises 'damage is manifested mainly in early midsummer... distorted and discoloured tulip-shaped buds... start to rot before actual flower is produced'. This pest is now endemic in the UK, here in Somerset causing a high proportion of spoiled buds throughout June until mid-July (later further north).

Growing daylilies that flower from mid-July outwits Gall Midge.

It is possible to manage Gall Midge without damaging chemical drenches or indiscriminating sprays. A strict regime of vigilant inspection (every third day as a minimum) and removal of distorted buds can be very effective, but it will not cure the problem. Suspect buds must be burnt, or thoroughly sealed in polythene bags and put into the domestic refuse (not the compost heap). This is a palaver, and no matter how thorough *you* are, someone in your locality won't be as conscientious. An alternative approach is to grow more daylilies that flower from mid-July, so their buds haven't formed in late



Fig. 6 'Charon the Ferryman'

spring when the adult midge is looking for homes for her eggs.

The most thorough classification of daylilies by flowering period has been devised by organic growers Lee and Diana Bristol of Bloomingfields Farm in Connecticut. Their ten flowering periods proceed from 'first early' to 'extra late'. Unusually, and commendably, they rely on their own observations. The US Dept. of Agriculture Zone 5 climate

and seasons differ from yours and mine, no doubt, but the list is a useful starting point. I would like to see all of the plants in their Late, Very Late and Extra Late categories trialled in the UK.

I'm illustrating this article with photographs taken after the 19th August 2013, so while some of the plants may already have been in flower for some weeks, all can be fairly called Lates in UK terms. If they're late in Frome, near the Somerset/Wiltshire border, they'll be late in most places on mainland Britain.

My plant wish list is in a tiny marbled notebook. I really have to want something before making an entry. Wants decline with the years, I find. Often a 'must have', when eventually found, is less essential than I'd supposed. Once in a while, though, a new acquisition is everything

you'd hoped for. As soon as I'd read about Ellen Laprise's 2009 intro 'Isabelle Rose' (fig. 2) I wanted to try it. Two years later, thanks to Jan Wyer's generosity in allowing me a division, I can confirm this is a floriferous, unusual form of impressive stature (though not as tall as registered yet) and it increases well.

If you find 'Isabelle Rose' too baroque for your tastes, 'TNT' (fig. 3) probably won't be your thing either, but I hope you can appreciate its poise and elegance. I like everything about 'TNT' – definitely one of the better reds. One attribute of seriously spidery daylilies which enthusiasts appreciate that general gardeners may not is the variability of blooms – no two flowers present in exactly the same way.

Several UK daylily collectors rate Jim Murphy's spidery introductions (including 'TNT') highly and have imported plants from Woodhenge Gardens. Some of his better intros should start to appear in UK nursery lists within the next few years.

Fresh bright-green daylily shoots emerging as early as mid-January are a joy in themselves. In some cases a good indication of later flowering is tardy emergence and one such is 'El Desperado' (fig. 4). Although I find fuller form daylilies less



Fig. 7 'New Curlicue', one of my introductions, I describe as 'a relaxed twisting cascade unusual form daylily in amber and ginger', a plant of good stature.

appealing on the whole, 'El Desperado' is a good plant, particularly where space is at a premium as it's compact and increases very slowly.

A good show of healthy buds in the latter part of August (fig. 5) is a sure sign of midge-free flowering that will go well into September. Dan Bachman, breeder of 'Suzy Cream Cheese', also bred 'Charon the Ferryman' (fig. 6) which I'm currently evaluating.

In Britain, that elusive quality of 'garden-worthiness' is paramount.

The criteria in European trials for 'landscape varieties' are instructive: leaves must be healthy and flowers should sit well above them; plants should be weather-resistant with strong wiry stems giving a massed colourful effect when seen from some way off.

My final illustrations come from my own breeding. In 2008 I introduced 'New Curlicue' (fig. 7). I don't take the decision to introduce a plant lightly. Too many American daylilies are introduced solely on account of a pretty face, with a sort of show-bench mentality appearing to trump practical gardening considerations.

Take a look at Tomas Tamberg's website to see some of the sorts of plants



Fig. 8 'Red Revelation' I like the light midrib, most apparent on the three petals but also discernible on the sepals, which accentuates the inherent starry quality of daylily flowers.

that might suit, say, a Piet Oudolf or Tom Stuart-Smith scheme. Massed impact isn't necessary in small gardens, of course, where a single bloom can be captivating. My good friend, Robert Grant-Downton, who, if anyone can, will one day produce a blue daylily, used not to be keen on reds until one day in my garden he saw the light. Ever since, this seedling has been dubbed (Robert's) 'Red Revelation' (fig. 8). It's not been introduced because I have to keep in check my predilection for reds and 'Forsyth' (fig. 9), introduced in 2010 is, I judged, the better garden plant.

While I like to flatter myself that I'm a daylily breeder I am honest enough to admit that the pioneers who developed today's extraordinary colour, form



Fig. 9 'Forsyth'

and pattern range from an almost exclusively yellow species gene pool did 99% of the work.

In recent years, partly in reaction to over-blown full-form plants, there's been some resurgence of interest in going back to the species. *H. citrina*, while not late, is well worth growing for its floriferousness, scent and stature and has passed all of these qualities to my seedling 09C1 (fig. 10). An extract

from my notes on 09C1 will serve to show what I'm looking for: 'a consistently wide open spider, good dawn to dusk, modest primrose self (between RHS colours 7D and 8C), room-filling scent a bit like lily of the valley, 115cm bolt upright willow 'wands', flowers from 85cm up, approx 16cm diameter bloom, flowered mid July to 28th August, 2013'.

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Fig. 10 DS seedling 09C1

I want to monitor for at least four flowering years before deciding a seedling is both good enough and, just as importantly, different enough to be named and introduced.

With only one year of flower to date, my final illustration, from 2010 seed, sown in 2011, has many hurdles yet to cross. I've already introduced three dark daylilies of which damson purple 'Marvellous Mum' will be the first to be widely available because it increases well. Seedling 11K2 (fig. 11) is a shade or two darker and with that striking midrib it really took my fancy in 2013 when it flowered for the first time. The dark stamens and contrasting green throat are the icing on the cake. The

parentage is 'Marvellous Mum' x 'Black Ice'. At its best 'Black Ice' has exceptional blooms, but it can also produce horribly misshapen ones, a trait that, touch wood, I hope to have eradicated in 11K2, which promises to be a tall true Late. With 3 flowers open on the 5th of August my notes record 'magnificent'. Bias? What bias?

Fashions come and go, aesthetic sensibilities evolve and tastes change if we're open-minded enough to allow them to. If, in the past, you've not found a use for daylilies, or if you've been put off by the dastardly midge, I hope I've given you food for thought.

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Fig. 11 11K2

I'm late for everything. Why turn up relaxed, unflustered and perspiration-free when those few extra minutes could be spent doing this and that. It drives my beloved Pat mad. How appropriate that I should find myself advocating daylilies that, like me, arrive late. 🐝

Duncan Skene is enjoying his second retirement, still trying to breed the perfect daylily.

A good place to take a look at daylilies online is www.daylilydiary.com which links to lots of breeders and growers, as well as the AHS (American Hem. Soc.) Registry. In the UK www.alacartedaylilies.co.uk, www.polliesdaylilies.co.uk and www.strictlydaylilies.co.uk are first ports of call.