

It's blossom time

Day lilies dot landscapes with annual color burst

By Tom Panzenhagen
staff writer

DAY LILIES BLOOM but once a year. That's the disadvantage of caring for an inconstant flora. The advantage, according to Larry Mackle, a day lily devotee, "is every day when I go home I might have 500 new flowers to look at that I never saw before."

"And you have a very long season — perhaps three months — and when the flower stops blooming, you have fun taking pollen off orange flowers and mixing them with green, like a kid with crayons, pollinating and creating your own blooms."

Mackle, wife Sandra and their three children live within the pail of Christ Church Cranbrook in Bloomfield Hills, where for 12 years the family has added row upon row of day lilies until now the buds, which number perhaps 10,000, will bloom by the hundreds, day after day, throughout the summer.

"It all started with a clump of roadside lilies out by the mailbox," Sandra Mackle said. Larry added, "In a sense I grew up on a farm... so the concept (of gardening) is something I grew up with and enjoyed."

That's not to say the day lily habit came natural.

"Six years ago," Larry Mackle said, "I thought day lilies were two colors, orange and yellow, and that there were only two kinds. It was a case of finding out there's more to it than that and that they're pretty."

MACKLE'S GARDEN now contains hundreds of varieties of day lilies, many of which he has cross-bred himself.

Harris Olson, a family friend and chairman of the Pontiac Mall day lily show coming up Saturday, explained that the crossbreeding, or pollinating, process is easy to accomplish but that "only about 1 percent (of the new blooms) is a huge improvement over what you already have."

Olson, who answers to the moniker "Mr. Day Lily," said Mackle has "a complete garden — he does everything here" and pointed to several blooms that he thought could be winners at the day lily show.

"Ruffling is the thing today," Olson said, displaying a bloom with rippled and layered petals. "And there's one with two blossoms — the best flower at the show will have three blossoms, not touching."

In another section of the garden Olson cupped his hand around a spindly looking bloom. "See these narrow petals? This is what we've improved from," Olson said, referring to newer, lustier-looking day lilies.

But as another blossom crumpled under his touch, Olson added, "Some flowers we've bred the hardness out of when the beauty was bred into them."

OLSON, a Birmingham resident and member of the American Hemerocallis (day lily) Society, is a self-proclaimed day lily junky. He attended a day lily convention in Alabama this spring even though cold weather prevented the flowers from blooming.

"That was OK, though," Olson said, "because we sat around and talked about day lilies the whole time."

One could almost say Olson lives and breathes

day lilies; he does, in fact, eat them. Popping a bud into his mouth, Olson remarked, "It tastes like lettuce."

He knows the tricks of his trade, too. Leaning over a bloom for a close-up sniff, Olson purposely rubs against the stamen and comes away with pollen on the tip of his nose. He then brushes the pollen into his hand.

Owning the pollen is like owning the plant," Olson said. "Some day lilies are worth \$100, and people will steal the pollen."

Olson expects 30 to 40 participants at Saturday's day lily show at the Pontiac Mall. Hours are noon to 5 p.m. Admission is free, and those attending may purchase plants and books on day lily care. Literature on the American Hemerocallis Society also will be available.

MACKLE, A WINNER at last year's flower show, isn't certain which specimens he'll exhibit at this year's event. Nor could he estimate the value of his day lily collection.

"Day lilies are cheap," Mackle said. "You can go to Bordines and get one for \$4. But they become relatively expensive when some hybridizer thinks he's got something — and then it remains to be seen whether other people agree. But 10 years later you can buy the same flower for \$4 again."

So why day lilies instead of, say, roses?

"Well, one of the reasons they're great flowers is because they don't care if they have sun or shade, whether they're fertilized or unfertilized, watered or unwatered, and I don't know a bug that eats them," Mackle said.

One suspects, however, from observing the well-manicured, vibrantly colored flower beds at the Mackle residence, that Larry Mackle's day lilies are very well cared for, even though their day in the sun is brief.

photos by Mindy Saunders

A day lily primer

Describing day lilies in "The Complete Gardener," Lois Wilson writes:

"Hardy, popular, sturdy, lavish with bloom, free of diseases and pests, suitable for planting anywhere, great variety in color, fragrant, appealing, handsome and lovely to look at, foliage with interesting contours, even thrives in containers, which most perennials do not."

To best care for day lilies, Wilson writes:

- Water deeply once a week.
 - Feed with high-phosphorus garden fertilizer in spring and again one week before and two weeks after bloom. Mackle and Olson maintain this is not necessary.
 - Twist off tattered, dead flowers each day to allow next flowers to come on.
 - Divide anytime by lifting clump, cutting or pulling apart and replanting.
- With proper care, day lilies may bloom from July to the first frost.

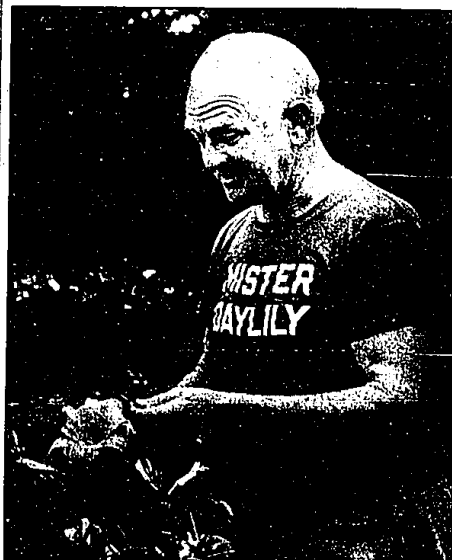


Day lilies will bloom until the first frost, but most of the thousands of varieties of the flower will blossom within the next two weeks, like the delicately ruffled day lily at left. Sandra Mackle (below) and husband Larry maintain one of the finest day lily gardens in the area at their Bloomfield Hills home.



"Some flowers we've bred the heartiness out of when the beauty was bred into them."

—Harris Olson, 'Mr. Day Lily,' crossbreeding a flower (below)



DEBRA BOOKER/staff photographer

On tour

The Birmingham branch of the Womens National Farm and Garden Association on Monday toured several gardens in the area. The Clarence Cheffs, Thomas Vandergrieff, Howard Engards, Kenneth Porters and Chester Wleniewski all played host. Sharrie Cheff (center) describes her oval-shaped garden, which is sur-

rounded by strawberries. The Cheffs have annuals and perennials from early spring to late fall, and she makes dye for yarn from some of the plants. Among its other activities, the farm and garden group keeps the flowers blooming in front of the Allen House in Birmingham's Historical Park each summer.