

FROM THE GROUND UP - Love and the Mattapoisett Moon: Smitten by the daylily

August 6, 2017 Publication: Standard Times, The (New Bedford, MA) Page: E1
Word Count: 989

Daylilies are the saving grace of many an August garden, as other plants fizzle out.

They more than dominate the garden at TomCat Daylily Farm in Mattapoisett. They ARE the garden.

For several years now, Cathy Jackie - with the help of husband Tom Grondski - has dedicated herself strictly to the daylily, which she propagates like a magician.

Whereas most of us just see color and form when we look at these plants, she sees their breeding potential for altogether new creations.

"I think it is the art and even science of it all. I have loved plants and gardening since I can remember," said Cathy. "Certainly I am no real botanist. But I do remember reading about Gregor Mendel in elementary school and was enamored by the science. I certainly only have a most cursory understanding of the genetics of it all. The love of the daylily is all about what I created from a bit of pollen dusting."

The nuance of color, form, size, and detail is so different in every bloom and sometimes she can see the two parent plants involved in the cross.

"I am often out on a summer morning perusing the blooms opening for the very first time and I'm glad there is no one around when I say, 'Oh look at your beautiful face!'" she said.

Like an ecstatic scientist on the verge of a discovery, Cathy will then run into the house and tell husband Tom, who will come and see the newest creation.

"When I set out to put a bright white stripe on a petal and then it shows it's lovely face as I intended, it is a great artistic reward," she said. "Mind you, it's a lot of delayed gratification. What was in my head for a cross is not seen sometimes for several years. Many of my seedlings this year have bloomed from one year since I put the grass-like seedling out in the garden. This is a real feat for me in my northern garden.

"For those that love daylilies there is this addictive quality that is unexplainable. Those afflicted understand."

Visiting the farm during peak bloom time I had to agree that these flowers just keep pumping out in warm color palettes that are very pleasing. Their farm, located at 25 River Road in Mattapoisett, has the look of a Currier and Ives painting with a big red barn and chickens, a horse-studded pasture and a huge vegetable garden all framed by stone walls.

Four long beds fill an acre of their expansive property and these are rife with daylilies for sale. There are additional nursery beds where new hybrids are tested and grown.

I have many new introductions every year. Cathy guesstimates she has somewhere between 10,000-20,000 plants. She is part of an international phenomenon.

"There are many growers - those who grow others' plants. There are also many hybridizers. I consider myself just a backyarder. There are many more experienced hybridizers," she said, noting there are 85,000 registered daylilies in existence.

If their names are any indication, daylilies are full of character. And if you hail from Mattapoisett, it gets even better! Cathy has given several of her cultivars names beginning with the town name: Mattapoisett moon, Mattapoisett moonbeam, Mattapoisett moonchild, Mattapoisett River Mist, Mattapoisett Beauty queen, Mattapoisett Queen of Hearts ... to name a few.

Far more derive names from their look or some source of inspiration: "White sands," "Kerfluffle" and "This Girl is on Fire" have a certain suggestive quality.

Cathy's signature plant is Mattapoisett Moon - I have one in a prominent spot and can vouch for its beauty - a lovely shade of white with a green center and a soft scent that pulls you in.

During one foray, Cathy met a second generation hybridizer (Dan Hansen of Florida) who named a daylily for her.

"I was asking about a cultivar that I wanted to buy that had no name," Cathy recalls. "In our chatting, I guess he was impressed enough with my knowledge and love of daylilies that he said I could name it and he would give me a plant."

Her end of the deal with to report back on how well the plant did in a northern situation.

"It's fantastic," he said. "I have already set seed on it and used it's pollen on other plants."

The couple continues to promote their stock at local farmer's markets and fairs as well as through the internet. They go to Plimouth Farmers Market, Osterville and Hingham and have also been to the Harbor Days in Mattapoisett the last two seasons. Their business is open Tuesday, Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday, 9-5. Their website is tomcatfarm.com but Cathy encourages people to come and visit in person.

"I do prefer that people see the blooms that they pick out. I dig them fresh. They bring them home, pop them into their garden and enjoy the rest of the blooms," she said. "That way they see the true color, the height, and there is very little shock to the daylily. The following year they come back as if they have always lived at their yard."

Daylilies grow most anywhere except full shade and overly wet soil. They do well in dappled sunlight and of course full sun. They will not succumb in a dry summer-but they will totally thrive if kept watered.

Even though the bloom only lasts a day, they can make lovely cut flowers.

"My son, Evan and his wife Anna, were married two years ago in the middle of peak daylily bloom," Cathy said. "My husband Tom and I went out in the morning of the wedding and plucked hundreds of individual blooms loaded them into large bins and delivered them to the venue prior to the wedding. The wedding planner was highly inspired by the blooms. The daylilies were put on the tables in the shot glasses, and they were piled on the head table, and most beautiful of all was the dessert buffet. They were lit with tea lights and created a beautiful colorful ambiance for the wedding reception."

Although she says designing gardens is not her forte, she can safely make the claim of daylily designer."

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Page: E1

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