

# Here Today...Here Tomorrow Local Daylilies Thrive

by Steven Knudsen

Spring has sprung in San Luis Obispo County, and across the area there is evidence of another bountiful year approaching.

A scenic drive out Hwy. 58 to Shell Creek Road will find you surrounded by hundreds of acres of wildflowers. As far as the eye can see, spots of color rise from the green grass to transform this grazing landscape into a painter's canvas of yellows, oranges and dark violets amongst the trees and rock piles scattered throughout the valley.

From day to day the colors move around the valley as one flower begins to bloom as another fades away. No less beautiful are the special flowers produced at Daylily West in Arroyo Grande.

Penny and Phil Ben have been growing daylilies commercially for the last 13 years

at their farm in Arroyo Grande. Originally active in the local farmers' markets, selling assorted vegetables and cut flowers, the Bens switched to daylily production after they saw an increase in local demand for their plants.

According to the couple, "The daylily has a reputation as the easiest perennial to grow. Like a rose, many growers plant the flower and enjoy it for a lifetime." The flower has no thorns and doesn't require pruning.

The daylily is not a true lily at all. Instead, it's a member of the small genus *Hemerocallis*, which loosely translated from the Greek words *hemera* and *kalos* means "beauty for a day," in the family *Hemerocallidaceae*. This hardy perennial was first cultivated in Europe and Asia before hybridizers brought the plant to the United States. The daylily flower opens for one day before fading to allow another bloom to open.

Daylilies have a tuberous root system and can be dug up and



transplanted with ease. Most plants bloom the first season after they are transplanted. Since most daylily varieties require a dormant season, special varieties have been produced for California growers. These evergreen daylilies stay green all year and only require thinning of dead leaves and removal of the dried scape.

*Hemerocallis* is one of the most hybridized plants. Most cultivars were produced in the last 100 years, with the greatest gain accrued in the last 13 years. In 1995, the American Hemerocallis Society had 30,000 registered daylily cultivars; currently, there are more than 60,000.

Today, more than 250 varieties of daylilies are produced at Daylily West. "Each year, we try to upgrade and find what's new and exciting in the industry," says



Penny Ben. "We try 30-50 new cultivars each year and normally keep only between 40 and 50 percent to resell from our garden."

Daylily flowers come in all shapes, sizes and colors except blue. The plant can produce a flower height between 12 inches and 6 feet. The bloom can be as large as 11 inches to as small as 1 inch. Blooming in late spring, a plant can throw as many as 50 flowers per scape, and flowers can range in shape from round to triangle and from spider to twisted. "These most unusual forms make the flowers a lot of

fun for gardeners to grow," says Phil Ben.

Not commonly used in formal cut-flower arrangements, daylilies do make a nice addition as their new flowers will continue to open on cut stems. Petals from some varieties are edible and high in Vitamin C; they can be found in Asian markets in both fresh and dried forms.

Daylily West produces a new catalog each year and updates their website with new pictures of each year's crop. Catalog prices average \$12 per fan pairs. Daylily West holds a Bloomfest from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. on Friday and Saturday mid-May through mid-June. The farm is open to visitors all summer until September 30 with an appointment. The flowers can be viewed at their website, [www.daylilywest.com](http://www.daylilywest.com).

When you take time to enjoy wildflowers and daylilies, you offer your continued support of the preservation of the agriculture lands in the county. By purchasing your food, plants and fiber locally from local producers, you directly aid in the preservation of these lands and the rural lifestyle.



### Photos

Far left – Wyoming Wildire (left) and San Juan Sunset daylilies.

Center – Daylilies thrive in the sandy soil in Arroyo Grande. Inset photo variety is Great Goodness Gracious.

Lower left – Fan pairs are labeled and ready for shipping (left) and Jolly Red Giant flowers.

Above – Blizzard Wizard (top) and Lighter Than Air.

*Photos by Steven Knudsen.*