

Lily Culture: a half century with lilies - by Art Delahey, Canadian Prairie Lily Society

Soil

Lilies grow best in a well drained soil. Heavy, poorly drained soil will cause lilies to develop problems which ultimately lead to their demise. Heavy (clay) soils can be amended with plenty of fibrous material (straw, wood-chips, etc) and/or sharp sand, washed gravel or crushed rock worked deeply into the topsoil. Regular applications will gradually improve the soil's friability.

The lighter sandy loam soils provide nearly ideal conditions for the deep-rooted bulbs, except these soils lack humus. Adding compost, well-rotted manure, leafmold or other fibrous material will improve the moisture-holding capacity and add nutrients for the bulbs. Under no circumstances should lily bulbs be planted in close contact with rotted manure.

Site

Lilies prefer to be in the sunshine, but will do well if they receive at least six hours of full, mid-day, sunshine. A sheltered southern exposure works best, although they will perform well on the east or west side of a north-south fence. Shelter from wind will let them attain their normal height, yet they should be open to prevailing breezes to allow air circulation to dry the foliage.

Planting Time

Because lilies put their roots down in the fall before soil cools down, it is best to plant bulbs in mid to late September. Bulbs planted later or in the spring will wait until the soil warms up to put roots down, thereby delaying their blooming period and somewhat reduce their performance.

Planting Tips

Plant in small groups of three to five bulbs, situated 8 to 10 inches apart. This will allow room for blooms and still provide a small mass of bloom. Refrain from planting too close to trees and shrubs as their roots will interfere with future digging of the bulbs. On lighter soils bulbs should be planted at a depth three times their diameter (5 to 6 inches deep). On heavy soils two times their diameter or 4 to 5 inch is adequate.



Example of planting depth in light soil

Dig the hole about two inches deeper than required and sprinkle a couple of tablespoons of good lawn fertilizer (16-20-0 or 11-52-0) in the bottom, cover this with 2 inches of soil and then set the bulb. [note: make sure there is no herbicide mixed with the fertilizer] Water thoroughly and, for the first winter, mulch the plantings. In the fall remove the stems by standing astride them and giving a sharp, twisting tug, or by cutting them off at the soil surface with a sharp hoe or spade. Additional fertilizing can be done at budding time (same fertilizer as mentioned previously) and again after the blooms have completely finished.

Replanting

After a few years lilies will need to be dug up and reset. A good rule of thumb is to dig them in the fall after the first frost and when six or more stems are growing where the original stem showed during the first year. Some varieties reproduce quite quickly while others take forever to produce new bulbs. Lift the entire clump, break the bulbs apart, replant the largest as described above, and become a hero by giving the balance to your neighbour or to your society's fall bulb sale if possible.

Irrigating

Lilies do best when they are not over-watered. Only in hot, dry spells will they really require moisture. Water in the morning so that the stems dry quickly, or better yet, flood-irrigate so that the stems and foliage do not get wet. Prolonged periods of damp and humid conditions foster the development of botrytis which results in dead, brown leaves and stems, thereby weakening the bulb and reducing the bloom size.