

My Favourite Perennial Companion Plants for Lilies

by Barbara Adams-Eichendorf CPLS Newsletter #110:5-8

My yard is located 50 kilometers north of Saskatoon in the Village of Hepburn. I have been gardening here for more than 20 years, and have tried an assortment of lilies and perennials in various locations throughout the yard over this time. My soil tends to be a bit heavy; I would say it is a silty clay-loam. It holds a lot of water and doesn't drain as well as the lilies would like. As well, once it dries out, it takes a lot of water to wet it again. The topsoil varies in depth, usually around a foot deep, with a very heavy clay subsoil. Fortunately the yard is gently sloped in most areas, so excess water can drain away.

I grow mostly Asiatic lilies, some Martagons and a few species lilies. The species lilies that have grown well for me are *L. dauricum*, *L. pumilum*, and *L. martagon*. I have tried to grow oriental and trumpet lilies as well as OTs but have had limited success growing them in my garden. Wilbert Ronald's "Starburst Sensation" has been the best of the OTs in the garden. Orientals and OTs have done well grown in pots. I leave them in pots year round; I do not bury them in the ground but cover them with a 10 inch layer of mulch (post peelings).

I think that lilies look very attractive in mixed borders with perennials and maybe a few annuals. By using a mix of early, mid and late blooming perennials, along with annuals, you can have continuous bloom through the growing season. Also, perennials add interest to the mixed border with different foliage textures and shapes.

To be worthy of inclusion on this list, the perennials had to have survived in my yard for 10 years or more, with minimal care and no special treatment for winter. And for every perennial that has thrived under my yard, I'm sure I've purchased ten that have languished and died. This has not always been the fault of the plant - I like to push the limits and often try Zone 4 and sometimes Zone 5 plant material. I have tried them all, from *Alchemilla*, *Agastache* and *Oenothera* to *Pachysandra*, *Tricyrtis* and *Tiarella*.

Also, badly behaved perennials were not allowed on the list. Included in this group were *Geranium* "Johnson's Blue", and *Achillea millefolium*, both of which are very invasive in my yard. Both these perennials get high marks for durability, but they seem to be very hard to get rid of once established. Also included are perennials that do not get along with lilies. Peonies are a special favourite of mine, but I have found that lilies planted too close to them seem to disappear, probably because they couldn't compete with the peony's huge root system. I would suppose that because both lilies and peonies share a susceptibility to the fungal disease, botrytis, that they should not be considered good companion plants for each other. I also have not included *Nepeta* (catmint) even though I quite like the plant. I have never had one grow more than 6 inches high before being grazed to the ground by thrillseeking felines in search of a high. I have also not included plants that are short lived. I really like penstemons, but I have found they only live three or four years in my garden. So, the perennials listed here are the toughest of the tough, surviving the extremes of Zone 2 weather and lending their beauty to my perennial borders. This is not to imply that they are perfect - only that their shortcomings are ones that I am prepared to live with!

And, as with most articles on gardening, there is a certain degree of subjectivity. Let's be honest it's totally subjective! Each of us gardeners has an opinion about what we like and what we truly despise and the quirky and sometimes illogical reasons for our choices which may have no bases in reality. We like what we like!

As I reviewed my list, I noticed that many of the perennials I like have blue flowers. Blue flowered perennials make a lovely complement to the red, yellow, pink and white lilies, and of course, are beautiful in combination with orange. The perennials that I will describe here are all grown in full sun. I grow a different set of perennials in the shade with the Martagon lilies but that will have to be another article.

I would say that bellflowers, campanulas, are among my favourites as lily companions. The peach-leaved bellflower, *Campanula persicifolia* is 2-3 feet tall with spikes of clear, medium blue, bell-shaped flowers, about 2" long and an inch

wide, which face outwards. It is also available in white, and both grow well in full sun or partial shade. It blooms over a fairly long period, usually all of July when most of the lilies are in bloom. In my yard, it often continues to give blossoms well into September.

There are many different bellflowers available for the garden ranging the height from 6" ground cover to 24-36" mid to back border size. My other top pick from this genus is the clustered bellflower, *Campanula glomerata*. It blooms in early and mid summer, and in my yard it grows between 18 to 24" in height. The blooms are medium to dark blue and are, as the name suggests, clustered along the bloom spike. The plant forms a low, spreading mat of leaves from which the bloom spikes arise. My all-time favourite bellflower is *C. glomerata* "Caroline" which is a lovely lilac colour with pinkish throat. I am also impressed with the white form of the clustered bellflower. The blossoms are very clean white and look good with any lily colour.

The clustered bellflower does spread by underground roots and will form a large mat over time. This may be considered a shortcoming by some, but it does give plant material to move to other places in the yard and when you have a large yard this habit is seen as a positive rather than a negative attribute.

For all around toughness, hardiness, and bug and disease resistance, I give high praise to the gas plant *Dictamnus albus*. In my yard it grows about 2-3 feet in height and produces racemes of pale pink flowers with darker veining for a few weeks starting in June. The plant gives off a lemony fragrance, from leaves as well as flowers and can cause skin irritation in some people. I am sure that the oils in the plant that give it the pleasant smell, act as a bug deterrent, as I have never seen any sign of insect damage on it. The compound leaves are dark, glossy green and very attractive. I also have the white flowered form but I do not like it as well as I like the pink. Gas plant blooms at the same time as Bert Porter's "Jolly Miller" which is a peach-orange colour and one of the earliest blooming Asiatic lilies in my garden. Gas plant is a bit slow to establish and hates to be moved, but once settled in it is a very durable and long-lived plant.

Salvia is another of my favourite perennials, and one of the things I like most about the plant has nothing to do with appearance. It is a member of the mint family and has a most attractive fragrance when you crush a leaf with your fingers. There are a few different cultivars of *Salvia* including "Rose Queen" - rose-pink, "Blue Queen" - medium blue, and "May Night" - dark purplish-blue. The plant grows about 18" tall and has dense spikes of small flowers. I particularly like the combination of "May Night" with orange or yellow lilies. *Salvia* are a good cut-flower and bloom through July and August for me.

Similar to *Salvia* in appearance and colours available is Speedwell or *Veronica*. I have several different speedwells in my garden. The earliest blooming is *Veronica gentianoides*, the Gentian speedwell, notable for its basal leaves, and 12" spikes of pale, blue, half-inch wide flowers in mid-spring. Hungarian Speedwell, *Veronica austriaca* or *V. teucrium* has been reliable for an early-summer splash of blue at the front of the border for many years. It does not self seed or travel by underground roots, but does tend to be a bit floppy after blooming, a habit which is easily remedied by a light trim with the shears. The durable *Veronica spicata* or Spiked Speedwell, blooms in July and August, at the same time as most Asiatic lilies. In my garden, it is about 2 feet tall with spikes of small flowers of medium blue colour, which makes a nice contrast with almost any lily colour. *Veronica spicata incana* forms a mat of silvery, felty foliage and has 12" spikes of small, dark blue flowers. The latest blooming Speedwell in my yard is a deep rose-coloured cultivar called "Red Fox" which blooms in August. Spike Speedwell makes a nice cut-flower filler with lilies in floral arrangements. My only complaint about it is that it self seeds a little too freely if deadheading is not done on time.

Another blue-flowered perennial that I look forward to seeing at lily time is *Scabiosa caucasia*, the pincushion flower. It has fairly large flat flowers, 3 inches across, with a pincushion-like center. The flowers are lilac-blue. The plant itself is bushy, about 12" tall and 18" wide, with a single flower at the end of a wiry stem which may reach 3 feet. I have grown two other members of this genus and I was not impressed with either plant. The first was *Scabiosa columbaria* "Butterfly Blue" which is a lovely plant when seen at a garden centre but I could not get it to survive more than two years. The

other is *Scabiosa gigantea*. It is hardy and pest-free, about 18" wide and five feet tall, but the flower colour, described as primrose yellow, is not to my liking. It is a pale, greenish yellow and not terribly attractive, at least to me.

Daylilies are non blue-flowering perennials that have grown in prairie gardens for years. They are members of Liliaceae family, a genus of fibrous rooted plants. Two of my favourites are the yellow-flowered "Stella d' Or" and the burgundy red-flowered "Pardon Me".