Programs > Premiums

Each year the club gives members a premium, either bulbs or live perennials.

This year our premium will be Asiatic Lilies.

Lily Photo by Marilyn Cornwell

Asiatic Lilies – Your Premium from the CVHS

by Judy Zinni

Lilies are beautiful, elegant additions to any garden. The lilies that you have received this month as a premium are true lilies – of the genus Lilium; not calla lilies (Zantedeschia), daylilies (Hemerocallis), or foxtail lilies (Eremurus). There are lilies for almost every situation – full sun, part shade, well-drained soil, wetter soil, at the woodland edge, in the meadow, in the rockery, in an English border. Lilies are broken into various classifications (based on their genetic background) and knowing their classification will give you information as to their needs (sun exposure, soil type, amount of moisture, etc.) and their time of bloom. The lilies you have received are classified as Asiatics.

Asiatic lilies bloom in early summer and require full sun exposure, good air circulation, and friable well-drained soil. Your well-drained site could be sandy soil, a raised bed, or a sloped area. It is worth noting that fresh bulbs should be planted as soon as possible; this will increase the success of the planting. Start by digging a hole that will allow 4-6 inches of soil over the bulbs (the larger the bulb, the deeper it's planted), and will allow the group of bulbs to be planted with 6-8 inches between them. Lilies, like all bulbs, will look best in groupings of uneven numbers (3, 5, 7), and can be tucked in around other plantings such as perennials. They will benefit from the addition of a good dose of humus in the planting hole; mix compost or manure into the planting soil. Cover the planting with soil and water the area well, immediately. Lilies enjoy a "cool root-run", so mulching the area works well if the soil surface is exposed to the sun. They will also appreciate an application of organic fertilizer, such as fish emulsion, a few times during the growing season. Giving the bulbs the conditions they want will give you beautiful blooms to grace your garden, in a planting that will increase year after year. After a number of years, if the stems start to become crowded, lift the planting, separate the bulbs, and replant; Asiatics will grow best if the plantings are moved to a different area of the garden every 5 years or so (you will know when this time has come as the stems will have fewer flowers, may become spindly, and the planting looks crowded).

Lilies are susceptible to some disease and pests. Many issues can be avoided by growing healthy plants through good culture. Fungal problems, such as Botrytis, can be avoided by providing a planting site that has good air circulation. If a fungal problem arises, remove the affected parts (dispose in the garbage, do not compost); the bulb should be fine the following year providing it hasn't been weakened by disease over several seasons.

The greatest issue facing lilies in southern Ontario is the lily beetle (Lilioceris lilii). This voracious pest can defoliate plants completely if left unchecked. The adult beetle has a bright red back, with a black underside. Beetles will be seen sitting on the leaves of lilies, often in mating pairs. The beetle larvae are a brownish-orange colour, but cover themselves with their own black excrement as a camouflage (yuck). The insect's eggs are bright orange and are laid in an uneven line on the undersides of the lily leaves (just encircle your hand around the stem and run it gently from the bottom of the stem to the top, checking for the eggs as you go). Diligence early in the season will significantly reduce the beetle population in your garden. As toxic chemical pesticides are now banned in our area, there are several lines of defense against the lily beetle:

1) Hand-picking. Adult beetles can be picked from the plants and squished under your shoe, or thrown into a bucket of soap and water (careful, they like to drop from the leaf and land upside down on the dark soil, making it very difficult to find them again with their black underbody). Eggs and larvae are easily squished with your gloved hand.
2) Neem oil. Whole Neem oil, with the active ingredient azadirachtin (look for this on the label), should be applied to the soil around the plants as the stems start to emerge in spring, which will kill the beetles emerging from their dormant winter season in the soil. Neem oil may also be applied on the plants later in the season directly on the larvae; this apparently disrupts their ability to molt and thus breaks their life cycle. Neem oil left on the leaves simply acts as a deterrent to the adult beetles which they find unpalatable. Some Neem proponents suggest mixing Neem in a higher concentration than suggested on the packaging; 2-3 times stronger than noted, and suggest using warm water. Any application should be repeated every 7-10 days using a freshly mixed batch (mixed batches lose effectiveness in 8 hours), and should be applied in the evening to avoid any potential issues with beneficial insects.
3) Some lily growers claim that coffee grounds around the plants, spread early in the spring, reduces the emerging beetles. I can't personally attest to this method, but the additional organic matter couldn't hurt.
4) Looking to the future, there has been much research done with a specific parasitic wasp to control the beetle. Last gardening season some of these wasps were released in the Ottawa area as a research project. If all goes well, these wasps may be coming to our area soon.

For more information on lilies, the web-site of the North American Lily Society is helpful (www.lilies.org). Locally, the Ontario Regional Lily Society holds several meetings a year, has a bulb sale in October, and a show in July (web-site, www.orls.ca). I hope you will enjoy the lilies in your garden.

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