

Some Bulbs Like It Hot

Plant these heat-tolerant bloomers to add sizzle
where the sun shines strong

by Richard Devine

I grew up in the Northeast where garden bulbs meant dramatic spring-bloomers such as daffodils, hyacinths and tulips. When I moved to northern Florida some 20 years ago, I naively planted the bulbs I had grown to love. While I enjoyed modest success with hyacinths, I struggled with daffodils, tulips, crocuses, and bearded iris. Most bloomed the first year but failed to either reappear or bloom again. Discouraged, I gave up on bulbs.

Then I discovered that summer snowflake (*Leucojum aestivum*) and Spanish bluebells (*Hyacinthoides hispanica*) were bulbs recommended for my USDA Hardiness Zone 9 climate. I gave them a try. After enjoying their blooms for a few years, I decided to seek out more bulbs that could take the heat. Since then, I discovered many bulbs that are suited to my warm climate. Some also grew well in colder climates, usually as summer bloomers, or can be grown in containers.

SOME BULBS DON'T NEED DORMANCY

As I hunted for bulbs to grow, I researched why most traditional spring-blooming bulbs perform so poorly in warm climates. The reasons have much to do with dormancy needs and how seasonal changes affect a plant's tendency to bloom. Some bulbs go dormant as the days shorten, or after one or more flirtations with freezing temperatures. This protects them from damage or death during harsh winters.

With some bulbs, dormancy is broken and flower development begins only after a specific period of cold temperatures. That's why many spring-blooming bulbs fail to flower where there are only brief cold spells. Another problem for many bulbs in very warm climates is that the long growing season prevents them from building up nutrient reserves for the following year. Many bulbs literally burn themselves out.

Some bulbs, however, perform admirably in warm climates, or even prefer hot weather. Some, like amaryllis (*Hippeastrum spp*), come from warm subtropical regions. (Zones 10 to 11) where seasons are very moderate. Others, like species of *Lycoris*, have wider growing ranges and less restrictive dormancy requirements.

BULBS TO ENBELLISH WINTER GARDENS

The earliest bulb to bloom for me is the Amazon Lily (*Eucaris amazonica* or *E. x grandiflora*). Even before winter has faded, the sparkling white, sweetly scented flowers of this tropical South American native star in my garden. Broad, glossy, dark-green appear first, usually in late January. Before long, stout scapes push up through the leaf litter, with swelling floral buds at the tip. The daffodil-like flowers, white with a greenish throat, open in umbels of three to five flowers each. Hardy in Zones 9 and 10, they're evergreen during mild winters.

Although Amazon lilies bloom here in the coldest part of the year, they seem undaunted by all but icy temperatures. If I expect a freeze, I cover them with a protective fabric called

freeze cloth. The midwinter bloom is certainly worth the extra effort. In cooler climates they usually bloom in the summer.

Amazon lilies prefer rich, well drained soil in light shade. Full sun will burn the leaves. They must be watered sparingly until established and during flowering, but can be watered more when the foliage is actively growing. My Amazon lilies have been slow to start, attaining blooming size only after a few years in the ground. I've found that they require little fertilizer and seem to respond well to a thick layer of oak leaf mulch.

Another winter star is clivia (*Clivia spp.*). Of the five species of this South African genus, I'm most fond of *Clivia miniata*, sometimes known as Kaffir lily. It produces strap-like, leathery leaves arranged in two rows. The flowers appear here in February or early March, at first packed tightly in a cluster of a few to as many as twenty buds at the end of a scape that arises from between the leaves. When free of the leaves, the flowers expand, colored a bright orange with a yellow throat. Flowers may also be red or yellow. Red berries follow if the flowers are pollinated. I've massed clivia in a bed which I keep expanding every year.

Clivia likes a rich, fibrous loam, with plenty of leaf mold in. I usually feed it monthly, from spring until fall, with a balanced fertilizer, and water it regularly while it's growing, slacking off it finishes blooming. It enjoys bright light, but not full sun, doing better than most plants in heavier shade. It also flowers better if crowded, so disturb it as little as possible. Although it's only hardy in Zones 9 and 10, clivia makes a great indoor plant.

TWO LESSER-KNOWN BULBS HERALD SPRING

Two of the first spring bulbs to bloom for me are Spanish bluebell (*Hyacinthoides hispanica*) and amaryllis (*Hippeastrum spp. and cvs.*). Spanish bluebell is the one that started it all for me, and is still one of my favorites because of its dependability and hardiness (Zones 4 to 9). Each fall I scatter more of them to naturalize and provide early spring color. The lilac-blue blue-shaped flowers appear as a raceme atop a stout, 12 inch scape, blooming just as the native plums (*Prunus angustifolia*) and redbuds (*Cercis canadensis*) are beginning to wane, and the dogwoods (*Cornus florida*) and evergreen azaleas are making their annual debut. They look unbeatable planted among the azaleas in drifts in woodlands.

Spanish bluebell adapts well to light shade in average soil and moisture conditions. Once established, it requires little extra care. To hide the unsightly foliage as it withers during the summer months, I mix it with hosta.

Commonly known as amaryllis, but distinct from the genus with the same name, *Hippeastrum* species and hybrids flower at about the same time as Spanish bluebell – early March here in northern Florida. There are about 80 species and many cultivars of *Hippeastrum*. Some are spectacular both in size and in color. Each plant produces three to six flowers, each up to 10 inches in diameter, on tough stalks 12 to 24 inches high. The colors range from white to pink, through coral and salmon, to red – even in combinations and stripes. In mild winters the foliage is evergreen, although some leaves turn yellow and wither away in summer heat.

I've planted many unnamed red cultivars along a border. Set against a backdrop of evergreen azaleas, the red blooms look quite showy. Hardy in Zones 9 and 10, these bulbs prefer spots several hours of sun, but will accept light shade.

In late spring here, *Agapanthus* – African blue lilies attract attention with their cheery, cool blue flowers. I'm most fond of African lily (*Agapanthus africanus*), also known as lily of the Nile (Zones 9-11). It has strap shaped, leathery leaves and each plant produces one to a few stout, 2 – 3-foot tubular scapes, topped with 10 to 20 or more blue, trumpet shaped flowers.

All African blue lilies like light shade and deep, rich, well drained soil. They also appreciate lots of water and monthly feedings when actively growing. Thriving in warm weather, some are hardy to Zone 6, most others to Zone 8. They also flower best when a bit crowded, so they shouldn't be disturbed except every five years or so, or whenever flowering declines. African blue lilies are well-suited to borders, mixed with daylilies (*Hemerocallis spp.*) and belladonna lilies (*Amaryllis belladonna*). They also look striking in masses.

SOME BULBS SHINE IN SUMMER HEAT

In late summer, just when the long spell of oppressive heat is taking its toll on all living things, species of *Lycoris* really shine. I first acquired a *Lycoris* plant quite serendipitously several years ago from a dear woman who shared my enthusiasm for warm climate bulbs. *Lycoris* is a genus of about 10 species native to west China and Japan. They are collectively known as spider lilies. Although they thrive in warm climates, most spider lilies are hardy to at least Zone 7.

Narrow, strap-shaped leaves appear first, bunched together grasslike in a clump. The leaves wither and die by summer, leaving nothing but bare soil. Then, during late summer, a stout scape pokes up through the soil surface and rises nearly 30 inches, terminating in a cluster of lilylike flowers that expands in the summer sun. There are three rose colored species – *L. sprengeri*, *L. incarnata*, and *L. squamigera*. *L. aurea* bears yellow flowers, and *L. albiflora* is white. *L. sanguinea* and *L. radiata* are luscious reds.

Lycoris should be planted in late summer or early fall in a sunny spot, in rich, sandy loam, with the neck of the bulb near the surface of the soil. After the leaves appear in early spring, I water regularly until the leaves turn yellow. I then hold off on watering – until the flower stalk appears in midsummer. I water well again until flowering is complete, then I withhold supplemental water until the leaves emerge in spring.

Other late summer bloomers are species of *Zephyranthes*, collectively known as rain lilies, rain flowers, or zephyr lilies. Rain lilies form large clumps if left undisturbed for years. Bunches of them often pop up along roadsides and open fields in the southeast just after a thunderstorm – hence the common name. Rain lilies are native to the grasslands of North and South America (Zones 7 – 11). They have grasslike, overarching foliage and a scape 12 inches high, with one to a few lily-like flowers. Blooms may be white, yellow, pink, or red. I especially like the atamasco lily (*Zephyranthes atamasco*), which grows well in woodlands and is hardy in Zones 9 to 11. Its 3-inch, funnel shaped flowers have white petals that are sometimes flushed with pink.

Most rain lilies like full sun, but don't seem fussy about soil as long as it's well drained. Most rain lilies I've seen grow just fine in sandy soil. Since they're native here, they don't require any special care. The natural moisture cycle under which they grow calls for wet summers, drying up by late fall, and remaining dry until the following summer. So, when growing them in a garden, water them well when in active growth, right up through flowering, then gradually hold back water until you see new growth the following spring.

Because of their sporadic flowering, I prefer to naturalize rain lilies or tuck them in here and there along a wooded path. They can also be included in a mixed border with other perennials or annuals that can hide their foliage as it dies back.

As a professional gardener in northern Florida, Richard Devine is constantly on the lookout for bulbs that can take the heat.