Autumn Lycoris Brightens the Late Summer Garden

Late summer can be a ho-hum time of year for landscape perennials. Colorful flowers of the early spring and summer bloomers are long-gone and mid-summer bloomers are looking ragged after the tough months of July and August. Fall bloomers like asters and chrysanthemums haven’t started blooming yet.

One plant that pops out at this time of year, brightening the late summer garden is Autumn Lycoris, aka Surprise Lily, Magic Lily or Naked Lady. Botanically this plant is *Lycoris squamigera* and is common in Nebraska gardens due to its cold tolerance, making it hardy to Zone 5.

There are several species of *Lycoris* to be found in garden catalogues, but the only one reliably hardy in Nebraska is *L. squamigera*. Don’t be tempted to buy other species, which are only hard to Zone 6. Autumn Lycoris is native to Japan where they have been cultivated for centuries, but they first appeared in the American garden trade about 1880.

Autumn Lycoris has a unique lifecycle. It sends up long flat strap-like leaves in spring, which die back around the end of June. To the new gardener, it may appear the plants have died but actually they go into a phase of summer dormancy. Then magically in late summer, bare 18-24 inch flower stalks appear in the garden and are soon topped by clusters of 5-7 lovely trumpet shaped flowers. Each rose-pink flower has a yellow throat and bluish coloration at the petal tips.

So you can see where their common names – Surprise or Magic lily - come from. They are called Naked Ladies due to the fact they bloom at a time when the plants don’t have any leaves.

Growing Autumn Lycoris

Plants are easy to grow and perform well in average garden soil. Plants prefer a drier site during their summer dormancy. Choose a full to partial sun site, with at least 4-5 hours of full sun each day, to ensure the best bloom. Plants don’t require any fertilization and don’t seem to be bothered by any serious pests.

Autumn Lycoris grows from a bulb and multiplies by bulb offsets. Bulbs vary in size from golf ball to tennis ball sizes. Divide plant clumps every 4-5 years in fall after the blooms have faded. Plant bulbs about six
inches deep in the soil and 9-12 inches apart. Plants do not produce viable seed and are considered sterile hybrids.

Since plants bloom from bare stems, underplanting them with a low groundcover will hide the stems and provide additional interest in the garden. Flowers are most eye-catching in bloom when the bulbs are planted in groupings of 7 or more.

**Surprise- There’s another Naked Lady**

_Amaryllis belladonna_ is another plant which goes by the same common names and is often confused with Autumn Lycoris. The tall stalks and beautiful pink flowers of both plants look very similar. But unfortunately, _A. belladonna_, is not a good candidate for Nebraska gardens due to its lack of winter hardiness. As a native to South Africa, it is only hardy to Zone 7 meaning it will die during a typical Nebraska winter.

**Sometimes Plants and Dogs Don’t Mix**

One final caution – Autumn Lycoris plants and bulbs are poisonous to dogs. Don’t use them in your landscape if you have a dog that likes to dig and eat plants.

**Your Suggestions are Welcome!**

Is there a lawn and gardening topic you would like to learn more about? Sarah Browning is an Extension Educator with Nebraska Extension and can be contacted by phone 402 441-7180, by mail at 444 Cherrycreek Road, Lincoln, NE 68528: or by e-mail sarah.browning@unl.edu.

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Sarah Browning

_Extension Educator_

Nebraska Extension

In Lancaster County

444 Cherrycreek Rd, Ste A, Lincoln, 68528-1591

402 441 7180