



Hybridizing Lilies in Alberta: Our Local History



'Raspberry on Whip', Asiatic lily developed by Fred Fellner. Photo by Shauna Willoughby.

Most lilies grown in gardens are hybrids of two or more wild species. Lily hybrids are divided into eight different divisions. Two of these, Asiatic hybrids and martagon hybrids, are particularly well adapted to Alberta's cool dry climate and reward gardeners with spectacular floral displays during the summer. Asiatic hybrids are derived from 12 species, most of which are native to Asia. They are characterized by large flowers that face upward, outward or downward and leaves that alternate around the stem and prefer open sunlight. Martagon hybrids are derived from five related species native to the North Temperate Zone of Europe and Asia. They are characterized by whorls of leaves around their stems and pendant flowers with re-curved petals, often called Turk's caps, and prefer open shade. While a good number of the lilies we buy are developed by large commercial establishments in Holland and the USA, many are also developed by amateurs. Over the last 50

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Tarlton martagons.
Photos by Shauna
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years many advances have been made in lily cultivars by amateur hybridizers in Alberta. The purpose of this article is to focus on the life, influences and accomplishments of four such hybridizers, the two Freds (Tarlton and Fellner) and the two Bobs (Erskine and Simonet). Together, they have developed the foundation for lily hybridization in Alberta.

Fred Tarlton was the first Alberta lily hybridizer. He was born in 1910, came to Canada as an infant, and was raised in the Consort area east of Stettler. When times were tough in the late 1920s Fred decided to leave his father's retail business and become a teacher. One of his early teaching positions was at Rich Valley where Georges Bugnet, the eminent early plant hybridizer and prominent Francophone writer, was secretary of the school board. Fred had learned French and was eager to practice, so on Thursday evenings he would visit Georges and they would converse in French. During that time Georges shared his philosophy of hybridization: "they had to be hardy in Alberta's climate." Later Fred grew seeds of different lily species from mail order catalogues. Eventually he found sources of already domesticated cultivars and began crossing them. Fred developed one of the first yellow up-facing Asiatics, 'Amulet'. Other Tarlton Asiatics include 'Alphard', 'Cool Breeze', 'Mamaska', 'Melusina', and 'Snowbird'. Fred made particularly significant contributions to martagon hybridizing. Some well-known martagon cultivars that Fred Tarlton developed include 'Akimina',

'Amelita', 'Attiwaw', 'Moonyeen' and 'Sarcee'. Fred's martagons have won a number of awards as has Fred himself.

Robert Simonet was born near Paris, France, in 1903. When he was 16 he immigrated to Edmonton with his older sister, who married a Canadian soldier. Robert worked as a steam engineer and market gardener but in 1930 finally settled on market gardening. His first passion was petunias, particularly in producing double petunias that would reliably breed true from seed. He learned plant genetics by going to the U of A library. Robert then became interested in lilies. He got some of his first lily bulbs from Fred Tarlton and his first Asiatic seed from Percy Wright in Saskatoon, seed from which he went on to develop several new cultivars. Robert's best known lily cultivars include 'Embarrassment', 'Lily Simonet', 'Summer Night', and 'Black Butterfly' which won a North American Lily Society Award of Merit in 1966.

Robert Erskine was born in 1914 near Oyen in southeastern Alberta and in 1934 he moved with his parents to Rocky Mountain House. He had an early interest in gardening but wasn't able to pursue his passion until after World War II when he purchased some land where he hoped to grow apples. He became involved with the Northern Small Fruit Growers Association where he met Fred Tarlton and they discovered their mutual interest in martagon lilies. Robert corresponded with other lily hybridizers

including Robert Simonet with whom he shared ideas and seeds. Robert Erskine's best known lily cultivars are martagons: 'Madeline Holloway', 'Carolyn Rallison', 'Maroon King' and 'Devon Dots'. Some of his Asiatic lilies are 'Apricot Pie', 'Apricot Silk', 'Green Eggs and Ham', 'Man O'War', 'Palomino Queen', 'Percy Wright', 'Pink Cheer', and 'Russet Ribbons'. Many of Robert's lilies have been registered by his colleague and good friend Madeline Holloway.

Fred Fellner is the youngster of this group. He was born in 1931 and lived his life on the family farm east of Vegreville, near Myrnam, Alberta. In the early 1960s Fred decided to grow perennials, including lilies, to supplement his farm income. He joined the North American Lily Society and found the names of lily hybridizers, including Fred Tarlton and Robert Simonet, living on the prairies. He corresponded with both and found them helpful and generous with information as well as plant material. Fred's entire focus has been on Asiatic lilies. His early hybridizing attempts were based on Cecil Patterson lilies (University of Saskatchewan) as well as Stone and Payne ('Red Velvet', the Connecticut series, etc.) lilies. In 1972 Robert Erskine gave Fred a dozen or so un-named seedlings, one of which Fred registered as Robert Simonet. The next year Robert gave Fred more Asiatic seedlings, at least seven of which Fred registered including 'Carol Jean', 'Elenore Edna', 'Kimberly Ann', 'Lily Simonet', 'Margorie Linda', 'Sally Jo Ann' and 'Wanda'.

Fred Fellner produced 7,000 to 15,000 seedlings a year from the late 1970s through 2008. In the late 1980s he focused on breeding for cut flowers but later he switched to producing show lilies that are much better suited to gardens. Approximately 50 of Fred's Asiatic lilies have been registered, many more than any other Alberta hybridizer. Some of the more well known named cultivars include 'Baby Pink Bells', 'Dori



'Lily Simonet'. Raised by Robert Simonet and registered by Fred Fellner. Photo by Shauna Willoughby.

Jo', 'Firefox', 'Heather's Promise', 'Honey Pink', 'Master Gardener', 'Melissa Jamie', 'Mother Teresa', 'Parkland Orange', 'Raspberry on Whip', 'Red Blaze', 'Red Galaxy', 'Red Raven', 'Spacious Living' and 'Yellow Joy'. Fred has continued the Simonet tradition of generously distributing his extra Asiatic lily seedlings.

In the last 25 years many other amateur lily hybridizers have developed new cultivars of both Asiatic and martagon lilies. Lily hybridizing is continuing with many new Alberta hybrids being produced each year. The Alberta Regional Lily Society (ARLS) holds two lily shows each year, a martagon show in late June or early July at the Devonian Botanic Garden and an annual show (with all divisions of lilies) in Edmonton in July. Many new unregistered cultivars are shown to the public for the first time at these shows. ARLS also holds several bulb sales around Edmonton in September of each year where local gardeners can find a wide range of lily cultivars, many of which are contributed by local growers. Alberta hybridized lilies can also be obtained from several commercial nurseries in the Edmonton area. ■