



The road less traveled - -

By Mike Huben
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Bob Sobek's garden will never be on a tour. I can say this for two reasons: one, he's a very good friend and long-time mentor of mine. And two, he says so himself.

Bob's garden is many things other than a showplace of landscape design: it is a library of 40 years of breeding, selection, and studied purchases of daylilies. It is a death-trap for those who are not sure-footed enough to evade clutching gooseberries, precarious railroad ties, and seedlings spaced six inches apart. It is a deathtrap for plants that cannot withstand cold pocket zone 5 winters and unwatered summer droughts. It is a home to 40 years of breeding short bearded *Iris*.

Even though Bob weeds several times a year, he allows his favorite self-sowing weeds to grow: butterfly weed, moth mullein, tall phlox, cinquoils and especially chickory. It is a patchwork of new seedlings, selected seedlings, other people's seedlings, and introductions shoe-horned into every crevice and organized only by Bob's buried labels, notebooks, and memory. There is no statuary, decoration or hardscaping; heck, there are barely any paths.

This is a plant explorer's garden; you walk surrounded by diversity which Bob can reveal to you over months and years. Bob's garden has daylily bloom from May to October which is something you cannot tell with just one visit. Mention a daylily interest, and Bob will show you what he has accomplished and accumulated for that goal over the years. Mention a need, and Bob usually offers plants or pollen.

In my lifetime, I've been privileged to have several mentors in several fields. My longest and most productive relationship by far has been with Bob Sobek.

Bob is now a retired biology teacher, living adjacent to a stream called Stony Brook in Westford, Mass. (near Boston) with his wife Linda and a large number of rescued cats. He leads a rich life of family, friends, gardening, cooking and some vigorous athletic activities



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such as mountain hiking and hand-weeding an acre of beds in 90-degree heat.

When I arrived at the New England Daylily Society 20 years ago, there were more than a dozen active hybridizers in the club. Over a couple of years of talking with them, I found my first hybridizing goal: white northern rebloomers. But more and more, I found that the person I talked to the most was Bob Sobek. We didn't share an interest in white, but Bob had already bred one of the strongest rebloomers in existence: 'Three Seasons' (1990).

Northern rebloom is a particularly difficult goal, and meeting somebody with knowledge and experience breeding for it was a huge help. But an even bigger help was Bob's garden. As I started breeding, Bob's garden supplied me with a number of really important parent plants and pollen; my breeding would never have progressed as well without them. I've been privileged to return the favor as I've produced my own seedlings. For more than a decade now, Bob and I have shared freely our seedlings and purchases. We tour each other's gardens every year; I tour his several times a year.

Not one to automatically follow the fashions in vogue, Bob has his own standards, his own aesthetics; he breeds for his own goals. Large, round, ruffled flowers, eyes and edges, patterns and tetraploidy are not as important to Bob as good northern performance and brilliant, clear colors.

The awards system doesn't attract him to enter. He's not commercial; he does not sell from his garden, and he wouldn't want to be burdened with filling orders. To "get the plants out there," Bob introduces at Harmon Hill Farm, and Tranquil Lake Nursery has many older varieties.

He sounds like a crank! But by ignoring fashions, awards and commerce, Bob can focus on the qualities that make daylilies most worthwhile to us. Performance. Distinction. Form. Color clarity. Adaptability. Disease resistance. Foliage quality. Playing well with others. And each of these can be expanded into many qualities.



◀◀ Bob Sobek walks among his 'Echo the Sun' (1990).

◀ The prolific 'Three Seasons' (1990) displays its clump appeal.

— Marlene Harmon photo

▶ Sobek's seedling 05.18B

▶ Sobek's seedling 06.36

All photos by Mike Huben unless noted otherwise.



Hybridizer Bob Sobek's 40 years of controlled chaos



'Busting Out All Over' (2005)



'Blueberry Trumpets' (2005)



'Fraises Au Lait' (2003)

Performance can be expanded into long bloom, good increase, good opening, branching and budcount, scape density, sunfastness, clump appearance, drought tolerance and a host of other characteristics.

Color is particularly important for Bob; I suspect he sees more colors than I do. Shades of yellow which I cannot distinguish between are important to Bob, as are green throats, purity of pinks, lavenders, and purples, true browns without red or purple tones, saturation of color, colors that change throughout the day, and colors that are sunfast.

As a daylily judge for 30-plus years, Bob has very sophisticated understandings of these qualities; each can have multiple standards. For example, strong rebloomers don't need many buds because they will send up more scapes, but one-time bloomers need more branching and budcount.

Even more important, Bob is a remarkably thoughtful daylily breeder. One of the many important ideas that he lives by is about how to pair parents. If you'd like to improve on one parent, don't just consider which other plant could improve its undesirable traits, but also consider whether the cross will preserve the favorable traits. For example, will the cross retain branching while improving color? That's why Bob counts faults in potential parents; three big faults and you're out. Bob may make some spur-of-the-moment crosses the way we all do, but the vast majority of his crosses are planned well ahead of time using this

and another dozen or so other guidelines (that could make several other articles.)

So what does Bob breed? The answer is an eclectic mix of goals, primarily in the diploids. Why diploids? Three main reasons: because they have the greatest diversity; because they tend to have a more graceful habit; and because they require fewer seedlings or generations to get distinctive results.

Bob is limited to two thousand seedlings per year, and it takes three years to bring them to bloom. When he selects them at three or four years old, they are not moved; he grows them on in the same place as an undisturbed clump to see how they do long-term. Before he introduced his extra early 'Busting Out All Over' (2005), he had a 15-year-old, five-foot-diameter clump that still bloomed strongly.

Bob has always had northern rebloom as a breeding goal; he bought 'Stella De Oro' (Jablonski, 1975) the year it was introduced and hasn't stopped since using it in his breeding for rebloom. Early crosses that failed to produce rebloom did produce some serendipitous results: 'Echo the Sun' (1990) is a glorious, tall, yellow trumpet that often has 60 buds here in the north. Now, he is getting rebloom in all shades of yellow, cream, orange, red, pink, purple, and lavender. (See photos of seedlings 05.18B and 06.36, above, and Da Capo, next page.)

See Sobek, page %



Da Capo (2008) — Marlene Harmon photo



Seedling 84.76B



'Crazy Kids' (2012) — Bob Sobek photo



'Cool Spice' (1990)

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'Blueberry Trumpets' (2005) reflects another three of Bob's breeding goals: trumpet forms, clear anthocyanin colors (pinks, reds and purples), and early or extra-early seasons. It is one of the earliest non-yellow daylilies in northern gardens and a total delight. 'Fraises Au Lait' (2003) is an extremely clear pink trumpet with a massive budcount.



'Toy Trumpets' (1984) — Marlene Harmon photo

'Toy Trumpets' (1984) is Bob's most perfect introduction; its upright scapes with profuse branching and buds routinely win flower shows. Another early, small trumpet worthy of mention, but not introduced, is his 84.76B.

His most recent introduction, 'Crazy Kids' (2012) is a beautiful, short red with extreme performance: sunfastness, budcount, increase and the ability to throw wildly varying but excellent seedlings. I have an introduction out of it already. Bob will tell you that he already has much clearer colors than these, but he hasn't introduced them yet.



'Palmistry' (1995)

Bob's favorite color for daylilies is yellow-green, and he has a number of outstanding introductions. 'Cool Spice' (1990) is a 36-hour daylily with amazing substance; it opens on the evening of one day and closes in the morning two days later. 'Flourish Of Trumpets' (1998) has large, chalice-shaped blooms on fabulous scapes. 'Palmistry' (1995), one of only two tetraploid introductions, is an enormous bloom on a proportionally tall scape.

Another Sobek specialty is very-lates, often with bud building. The winner for most bud building is

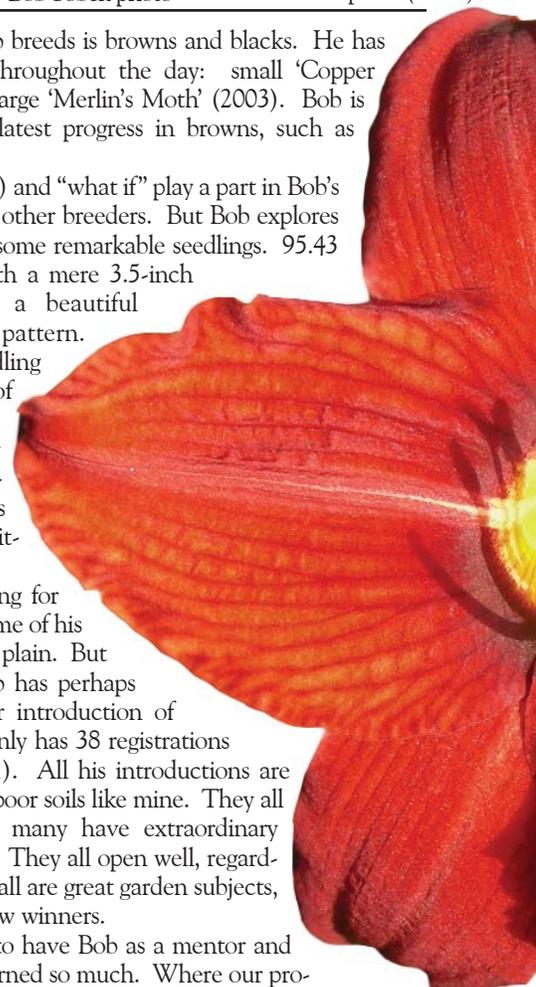
'Pumpkin Time' (1984), which I've seen having 16 buds on each of four branches. It will bloom into October in my garden. My personal favorite is 'Seventh Inning Stretch' (2005), a brilliant small red that just goes forever. Another very-late with amazing branching and budcount is 'The Kind of September' (2006). It has a plain flower, but it is an amazing standout in the late garden.

The weirdest thing Bob breeds is browns and blacks. He has two that change color throughout the day: small 'Copper Chameleon' (2005) and large 'Merlin's Moth' (2003). Bob is really excited about his latest progress in browns, such as 03.68.

Serendipity (dumb luck) and "what if" play a part in Bob's program, as it does for all other breeders. But Bob explores widely and ends up with some remarkable seedlings. 95.43 is a true small spider, with a mere 3.5-inch diameter. 95.6C has a beautiful brushed, stippled pattern. "IBSNE" is a bee pod seedling that has the grace of 'Nutmeg Elf' (McCabe, 1978) with better branched scapes and larger flowers. His garden is full of such treasures, waiting for exploitation.

Bob Sobek isn't breeding for fancy, nor for fashion. Some of his introductions are perhaps plain. But OH! What plants! Bob has perhaps the highest standards for introduction of any breeder I know; he only has 38 registrations so far (beginning in 1981). All his introductions are strong increasers even in poor soils like mine. They all are great bloomers, and many have extraordinary branching and budcount. They all open well, regardless of temperature. They all are great garden subjects, and many make great show winners.

I've been so fortunate to have Bob as a mentor and collaborator, and have learned so much. Where our programs overlap, we are both working much faster towards our goals. I hope you try some of Bob's introductions and see some of their outstanding qualities. Perhaps you will also look past the fashions to try to see Bob's vision of what makes a great daylily. ■



Seedling 85.43



Seedling 03.68



Seedling 95.6C



'Flourish of Trumpets' (1998)



'Pumpkin Time' (1984)



'Seventh Inning Stretch' (2005)



'The Kind of September' (2006)



'Copper Chameleon' (2005)



'Merlin's Moth' (2003)

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Seedling IBSNE