

Lily or Lotus by Gayla Aspenleiter

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As a novice water gardener, I believed that lilies and lotuses were one in the same. NOT! And apparently, I am not alone. After much reading and research I discovered there are many differences between the two but also a few similarities.

I'll start with their similarities. Both water lilies (*Nymphaes* spp.) and lotuses (*Nelumbo* spp.) are aquatic plants. Much of my research stated they are different genera from the same family. However, I did come across an article published in May 2012 that refutes this. According to Diana Yates, Life Sciences Editor, Illinois News Bureau, "the lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*) evolved from a group of plants known as eudicots and it was proven using DNA evidence along with other taxonomic studies".

The appearance of the lily and the lotus is similar but differences in size and habit distinguish the two. Hardy water lilies and the American lotus (*Nelumbo lutea*) are native to North America. Both are available in a variety of colors.

Water Lilies

Water lilies are classified into two broad groups—hardy and tropical. Hardy water lilies survive winters in cold climates like we have here in Spokane. They are a perennial in the USDA plant hardiness zones 3 through 11. Tropical lilies cannot withstand a winter freeze and need special care during cold winter months. Tropical water lilies are a perennial in USDA zones 10 and 11 only. To tell if a water lily is hardy or tropical, look at the edge of its rounded leaves. If the edge is smooth, the lily is hardy. If the edge is crinkled, wavy, or toothed, the lily is tropical.

Hardy water lilies have 8-12 inch leaves that float on the surface while their flowers bloom 6-12 inches above the water. Tropical water lilies leaves are varied in form and size and can reach up to 20 inches long.

Both tropical and hardy water lilies grow and bloom in full sun or part shade. Water lilies attract pollinating insects with sweet nectar on the first day of bloom. Nectar production ceases on the second day, and the flower produces pollen for two days. At the end of the

third day, the flower stem contracts and coils, pulling the flower into the water where the seeds mature within the ovary. Aril-coated ripe seeds float, facilitating dispersal.

Hardy water lilies come in a variety of colors; some even change their color each day of their three-day bloom life. Hardy water lilies flower during the day, with blossoms opening around 9 a.m. and closing around 4 p.m.

Tropical water lilies have both day and night blooming varieties. The night blooming varieties open after the sun sets and stay open the next morning until sometime between 10 and noon. Tropical water lilies have a distinct fragrance whereas the hardy water lilies are not near as fragrant.

Water lilies come in variety of colors. To see some beautiful photographs of water lilies go to:

www.photographyblogger.net/35-beautiful-water-lily-pictures.

Lotuses

Lotuses are larger than water lilies with leaves 18-36 inches long. The leaves and flower stalks stand up to 8 feet tall. Unlike lilies, lotuses hold some of their leaves and all of their flowers well above the water. Their leaves have a waxy covering that makes raindrops roll around much like little balls of mercury. Lotus plants grow well in bog gardens with just a few inches of water.

The lotus *Nelumbo nucifera* originated in the Orient and other Eastern locations whereas the American lotus (*Nelumbo lutea*) is native to the United States. The American lotus grows in USDA zones 5 through 10.

Lotuses require full sun to bloom. In fact, they require several weeks of 80°F weather to bloom. Lotus flowers remain above water during their three-day cycle from blossom to seed. The flat-topped, compartmentalized seed capsule forms in the center of the flower, expanding as the flower fades. As the seeds mature, the capsule becomes woody in texture.

Lotuses have fragrant blossoms in colors ranging from yellow, pink, or white to a range of hybridized shades.

Lotuses have an aggressive growth habit and should always be planted in a container without holes and placed at the bottom of your pond to control spread.

The lotus flower symbolizes purity in the Buddhist and Hindu religions, with different flower colors having different meaning in Buddhism. The pink lotus flower represents Buddha, his history and legend. The white lotus flower represents purity of thought and spirit. The gold or yellow lotus flower represents the gaining of enlightenment.

To see photographs of lotuses go to www.flowerpicturegallery.com/v/lotus-flowers-gallery.

Water lilies and lotuses are a wonderful addition to any water garden, bog or pond. They add oxygen to the water, provide shelter for your fish, and provide a splash of color to your water garden.

Resources:

Creating Water Gardens, Meredith Books, Des Moines, Iowa

Garden Pools and Fountains, Meredith Books, Des Moines, Iowa

Water Gardening, Greg and Sue Speichert

www.planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/PHZMWeb/#

www.homeguides.sfgate.com/difference-water-lily-lotus-67046.html

www.simple-expressions.org/2007/12/is-lotus-different-from-water-lily.html

www.news.illinois.edu/news/13/0510lotus_genome_RayMing.html