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Summers' splendor reaps rewards at lily show

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Health economist by day; lily grower by night (and weekend). Professor Gail Jensen Summers divides her time between complex analysis of Medicare [data](#), and coaxing delicate lilies into breathtaking, perfectly timed blooms. She won big on both fronts this year. Peer-reviewed economics journals published two of her papers this spring, and she won the Best Lily in Show award at the 66th North American International Lily Show in June.

Both endeavors require patience and close attention. On the lily side, Dr. Summers has competed for a decade; her husband, Warren, has grown and hybridized lilies for 30 years. They met, of course, at a lily show.



Gail Summers and her husband, Warren, won three prestigious awards at an Iowa lily show.

The Bingham Farms couple took three prizes in June: their species lily (that is a non-hybrid growing naturally in a garden) won the Isabella Preston Trophy for Best in Show and the Harold Comber Award for Best Lily Species. Another lily of theirs, called Sweet Irene, won best stem of a named lily of New England origin. Their Isabella Preston win is noteworthy, because species rarely beat out all the magnificent [hybrids](#) for Best in Show.

Lily competing is risky. Dangers lurk. Disease, insects, wind, rainstorms and deer threaten daily. The night before they left for the Iowa show, Summers' *lilium hansonii* was nearly decapitated when a deer ate the blooms off two adjacent lilies. A metal deer fence protects most of the garden, "but this perfect lily sprouted just outside the fence," she said. "We sprayed Liquid Fence but, as the

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eaten lilies prove, it doesn't always work."

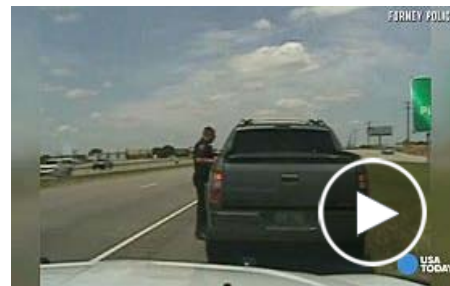
Driving six prized lily stems from Bingham Farms to Des Moines, Iowa, is no waltz through the garden, either. Warren designed a segmented crate to keep the lilies freestanding and upright, with each stem cradled in a gin or wine bottle.

"You don't want to have to slam on the brakes," Summers said. In lily shows, timing is everything. The obedient lily blooms the night before the judging to show maximum freshness and color.

"Mother Nature is the big wild card," she said. "We can control the bloom only a little. A cool fridge will slow it. Sweet Irene (best stem of New England origin) was behind, though, so we had to force it open. We put it in our [van](#) in the sun." It worked. Irene bloomed the night before the judging and looked marvelous.

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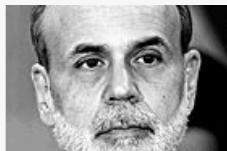
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