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Econ Professor's Hobby Blooms into Top Prize

DETROIT – 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 breath-taking, 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.



Dr. Summers with her Best in Show trophy.

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 (we'll get to that later) lilies for 30 years. They met, of course, at a lily show. The couple took three prizes in June: their species lily (that 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.



Close-up of *lilium*. Notice the perfect bowl shape inside the row of petals.

Lily competing is risky. Dangers lurk. Disease, insects, wind, rainstorms and deer threaten daily. The night before they left for the Iowa show, Dr. 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 eaten lilies prove, it doesn't always work."

Driving six prized lily stems from Bingham Farms, Michigan 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," Dr. 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," Dr. Summers 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.



Dr. Summers and husband Warren with Best in Show winner *lilium hansonii*.

Warren is an accredited North American Lily Society judge and judges' instructor, and successful hybridizer. "You could wallpaper a room with all his blue ribbons," Dr. Summers said. He created Sweet Irene (named for his mother) in the early 1990s and has registered more than a dozen other new lilies over the years, many of them prize-winning. Hybridizing requires years of patience, talent and some good luck. You cross two lilies, chart the pedigree carefully and wait 2-7 years for a bloom, then another 2-4 years to see whether it is hardy enough to introduce. "We seek out the true survivors," Dr. Summers said. "They must grow vigorously in normal garden conditions, not succumb to pathogens and viruses. We give no pampering or coddling. Only if they stand the test of time, will Warren introduce them into the lily community." For every 1,000 seedlings, only 1 or 2 pass the test.

The odds are better in Dr. Summers economics life, where her recently published papers took a close look at the relationship between Medicare reimbursements and a patient's access to and satisfaction with care. As payments shrink, physicians accept fewer Medicare patients. The patients they do see self-report less satisfaction with the quality of their care and their access to services. "These are important consequences to consider as healthcare changes in the U.S.," said Dr. Summers. "If reduced payments to physicians lead to poorer health, and that requires more medical services, what have we gained?" Whether in health care analysis or lily competition, Dr. Summers keeps working to find the win.

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