EASTER LILIES

At this time of year, Easter Lilies (Lilium longiflorian), are found everywhere - in the stores, in our homes, at churches and all around town. They are a true symbol of Easter, spring, and life. Native to the Ryukyu Islands of southern Japan, Easter Lilies first arrived to the United States in 1919 by a Louis Houghton, a World War I soldier, who freely distributed them to his horticultural friends and neighbors.

Until 1941 Japan and Bermuda were the only source for most of the bulbs imported into the United States. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, Japan lost the American market. As a result, the value of lily bulbs skyrocketed and many who were growing the lilies as a hobby decided to go into business.

By 1945, there were about 1,200 growers producing bulbs up and down the Pacific coast. But, producing quality, consistent lily bulbs proved to be an exact and demanding science with specific climatic requirements. Over the years, the total number of Easter Lily bulb producers dwindled down to just ten farms in a small, isolated coastal region straddling the Oregon-California border. This region, called the Easter Lily Capital of the World, produces nearly all of the bulbs for the blooming potted Easter Lily market. Even after the Japanese started to ship bulbs in again after the war, they have never been able to come close to the quality of those healthy, U.S.-grown bulbs, and thus never regained any significant market share. Today, those ten growers produce 95% of all the bulbs grown in the world.

Although Easter Lilies are only sold for a short period in the early spring, they are the fourth largest potted plant crop in the United States, only to be out ranked by poinsettias, mums, and azaleas. Besides California and Oregon, Easter Lilies are also grown commercially in greenhouses in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Ohio.

When purchasing an Easter Lily, select one that the flowers are just about to open. The blooms only last a few days, so selecting one that is just ready to open will maximize their bloom time in the home. Once home, remove any plastic or foil wrapping around the pot that will hold water and cause the bulb to rot. Also, be careful not to let the yellow pollen of the flower drop onto any furniture or other material, as it can stain. As the flowers fade and wither, cut them off to better enjoy the fresher ones.

Use extra caution when bringing Easter Lilies into a home occupied by cats. The Easter Lily is highly toxic to cats. In fact, the only reported toxicity is in cats. This is a relatively newly reported toxicity and can be lethal. If a cat is known to have eaten an Easter Lily, contact a veterinarian immediately. The best chance of recovery is if emergency treatment is begun within six hours of consumption.

When the Easter Lily is done flowering, do not throw it away. They are perennials and will grow successfully in your landscape. Before transplanting the Easter Lily in the garden, first select a sunny location and amend the soil with organic matter or potting mix. They prefer to be grown in a rich, well-drained soil. Gently remove the lily from its container and place in a hole no deeper than it was originally grown. Like will all transplanted plants, water it in after planting, making sure no air pockets remain. Fertilize with a slow-release fertilizer as directed on the fertilizer bag and finally mulch around the plant.

The Easter Lilies sold in the stores this time of year were forced to bloom in a greenhouse. Naturally, Easter Lilies bloom in the late spring or early summer. They will go dormant in the late summer or early fall, but emerge again in January or February. With proper care, the Easter Lilies can bring you many years of beauty to your landscape.

Need to brighten up your landscape after the hurricanes and long winter months? Come to the Osceola County Master Gardeners Plant Sale. They will have a large assortment of plants including old garden roses, annuals, herbs and other landscape plants. It will be held on April 1st and 2nd from 9am to 2pm in the KVLS Building in Osceola Heritage Park. Call (321) 697-3000 for more information.

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