Friday’s Feature
By
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Caring for Easter lilies

Easter has its share of traditions including egg decorations and hunts, gift baskets and chocolate bunnies, sunrise church services and the Easter lily. For many, the elegant trumpet-shaped white flowers are a symbol of beauty, hope and life.

The Easter lily, whose scientific name is *Lilium longiforum*, is native to the southern islands of Japan. We can thank Louis Houghton, a World War I soldier, for the popularity of the Easter lily. In 1919, he brought a suitcase full of hybrid lily bulbs to the southern coast of Oregon and, like a true gardener, gave them to family and friends to plant.

For the longest possible period of enjoyment in your home, look for plants with flowers in various stages of ripeness. For example, the best selection would be a plant with just one or two open or partly open blooms, and three or more puffy, unopened buds of different sizes. The ripe puffy buds will open up within a few days, while the tighter ones will bloom over the next several days.

In the home, potted Easter lilies prefer a moderately cool temperature around 60 to 65°F. Place the lily near a window that receives bright, indirect natural light but avoid direct sunlight. Water the plant when the soil surface feels dry. Begin by removing the decorative pot cover. Water until it seeps out of the pot’s drain holes. Allow the pot to drain for several minutes before putting it back into its decorative cover. Never allow the plant to sit in trapped, standing water.

As the flowers open and mature, remove the yellow anthers before the pollen sheds. This will give the flower longer life and prevents the yellow pollen from staining the white petals. When a flower starts to decline, cut it off.

After the last bloom has withered and has been cut away, you can continue to grow your Easter Lilies by planting them outside in your garden. Easter lilies prefer a sunny location in a well-drained soil that has been amended with organic matter. Good drainage is the key for success with lilies. Our sandy soils usually have good drainage but you will have to add compost, composted manures or other organic amendments to your planting bed. Adjust the soil to a pH of 6.2 to 6.5. Avoid planting the bulb too deeply by keeping it at the same level it was growing in the pot and water immediately after planting. Lilies like...
their “feet in the shade and their heads in the sun,” so be sure to mulch with a 2-inch layer of compost, pine straw, or leaves.

Eventually, the leaves will die back. Once they have died completely, you can cut off the stem at ground level. The following spring, fertilize with a light application of a complete fertilizer or a “bulb special” when the new shoots emerge and again about six weeks later. Apply the fertilizer to the soil around each plant about 2 inches from the stem and water in.

Easter lily producers use a complex set of planting dates and chilling methods in order to get the bulb to bloom around Easter. Don’t expect your garden planted lily to bloom exactly at Easter. But, it will rebloom sometime in late spring.

Just an added note, Easter lily leaves, stems and flowers have a high toxicity rating and are toxic to cats.

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