

# Don't Throw Away Those Lilies!

by Frederick B. Essig

I wouldn't hazard to guess how many white Easter lilies are sold worldwide every spring. Surely it is in the millions. Most will end up in the trash once the blossoms have faded, which is unfortunate because Easter lilies are the easiest of the true lilies to grow. A lot of Floridians don't know that Easter lilies not only can be planted out-of-doors here, but actually thrive and multiply with little care. I find them a joyful addition to the spring flower bed. Even as I write this in the middle of January, the leafy lily stalks are pushing their way up from their underground bulbs, oblivious to the excessive number of frosty nights we've had this winter. After they bloom in May, they will sit out the hot summers, lying dormant even in occasionally rain-drenched soil.

The Easter lily's tolerance of Florida's mild winters and hot, wet summers is a rarity among the true lilies, which belong to the



photo by Frederick B. Essig

Although not quite as easy to grow as the Easter lily, Formosan lilies are elegant beauties.

genus *Lilium*. Most of the hundreds of species, varieties, and hybrids are in fact more at home in cooler climates, and wither in our tropical summers. Some can be grown during our cool season, but require cold, relatively dry conditions for winter dormancy. The true lilies have above-ground stems bearing many strap-shaped leaves along their length, and a few large, 6-parted flowers at the top. Their bulbs are made up of relatively few, large, thick bulb scales, quite unlike the thin, closely packed scales of an onion or amaryllis.

The name "lily" has been used in com-

mon parlance for a great variety of plants with large, showy, and often waxy flowers. In *Hortus Third*, the great encyclopedia of cultivated plants produced in the early 1970's, there are over 80 unrelated kinds of plants called lilies, including calla lily and voodoo lily (both aroids), waterlily and pondlily (aquatic plants with floating leaves), rain lily, aztec lily, amazon lily, and lily-of-the-Nile (all members of the amaryllis family), plus daylily, pineapple lily, and lily-of-the-valley (all in separate families somewhat related to the lilies), to mention just a few. Many of these can be grown in Florida, but none has quite the elegance and grace of the true lilies.

The Easter lily, *Lilium longiflorum* var. *eximium*, came originally from Japan. It thrives in central Florida, even in full sun, multiplying over the years to form



photo by Frederick B. Essig

The pine lily can be found in wet flatwoods throughout most of Florida.



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*This oriental lily bloomed a second time after being refrigerated for 4 months.*

great clumps, as long as it has a moderate amount of moisture and a little fertilizer now and then. An apparent close relative is *Lilium formosanum* which comes from the tropical island of Taiwan. It forms a larger plant with long, narrow leaves, and trumpet-shaped whitish blossoms. The Formosan lily also is tolerant of

Florida's climate, but seems to be more disease prone and does not persist like the Easter lilies.

The great surprise for lily lovers in Florida is to discover that we have several native species, including a couple of hard-to-find species in the far northern part of the state, and one that is found in bogs and moist pine flatwoods throughout the state, *Lilium catesbaei*, the pine lily. Pine lilies produce a single, large, orange-red flower at the top of the leafy stem in the fall. Although they can sometimes be found in large colonies "out in the woods," they are not easy to cultivate, most likely because of their finicky soil moisture requirements. They seem to thrive in wet soil, but not standing water. I've grown them in pots for several years, on an experimental basis, but so far have lost them before getting flowers.

Finally, is it worthwhile trying to grow any of the other lilies from up north?

Many can, of course, be easily grown as "throwaways." In fact, you can often find them in florist shops and even grocery stores as potted plants. These have been "forced" in greenhouses up north. I'm sure you could choose any of the tempting lilies offered in those glorious color catalogues, pay \$6 or more per bulb, plant them in the winter, and get them to bloom in the spring. But that would get costly after a while. The trick is to get them to bloom again the next year, maybe even to multiply. I have had some success by storing the bulbs in the refrigerator after the tops wither in the summer. The pink oriental lily (*Lilium speciosum*) pictured here is, in fact, a second year blossom from a plant bought at a supermarket floral shop.

Whether such experimentation is your cup of tea or not, don't throw out the Easter lilies you get this spring - plant them out. They love it here in Florida!

*An Associate Professor of Biology at the University of South Florida in Tampa, Dr. Frederick B. Essig shared the secret to great calla lilies in the Feb/Mar 01 issue of Florida Gardening.*

## SOURCES

**McClure & Zimmerman**  
PO Box 368  
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**Dutch Gardens**  
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photo by Frederick B. Essig

*Easter lilies grace central Florida gardens in May.*