

Tale from the Garden!

During the Easter season, homes and churches alike are adorned with the gorgeous, fragrant white blooms we call Easter lilies. The Easter lily (*Lilium longiflorum*) is a perennial bulb with large, white, trumpet-shaped flowers that have a wonderful perfume. This plant is called the Easter lily due to its role as a traditional Easter-time symbol. They are traditional symbols of hope and purity during the Easter holiday season. Purchased as potted plants, they make welcome gifts and attractive holiday decorations. The plants last only a few weeks indoors, but planting Easter lilies outside after the blossoms fade lets you continue to enjoy the plant long after the holiday season.



But have you ever thought about where these flowers came from, or how they got their name? They're more than just pretty. These blooms have a fascinating history.

There are several theories about Christian symbolism surrounding the Easter lily. Often referred to as "white-robed apostles of hope," their colour symbolizes the purity of Christ, who was free from sin. In many paintings, the angel Gabriel is depicted as handing Mary white lilies, which symbolizes her purity as well. The trumpet shape of the Easter lily represents a trumpet sounding the message that Jesus has risen, and the nature in which lilies grow is symbolic of the resurrection too. From ugly bulbs that are underground for three years or longer, they become beautiful flowers. This process is reminiscent of Jesus's brutal death and holy resurrection. Thus, lilies represent rebirth and hope, just as the resurrection does in the Christian faith.

Lilies are also mentioned or alluded to several times in the Bible. Some think that it was white lilies that sprouted in the Garden of Eden as Eve's remorseful tears fell to the ground. There are also theories that Easter lilies grew where Jesus's tears and blood fell from the cross, and lilies were supposedly found in the Garden of Gethsemane after the crucifixion, tying them even closer to the Easter holiday.

In Matthew 6:25-29, Jesus says, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these."

The History

Although Easter lilies are symbols of new life and purity, their history of getting to America (the main producer) is actually rooted in war. Easter lilies are native to a few islands south of Japan. They were brought to England in 1777 and later Bermuda, where they were produced on a large scale and earned their first nickname, the Bermuda lily. After a virus wiped them from Bermuda, Japan was once again the only source of Easter lilies.

Following World War I, soldier Louis Houghton brought a suitcase of lily bulbs from Japan back to the U.S., specifically to his home state of Oregon. Houghton gave the lily bulbs to his horticultural friends, and soon enough, the area along the California-Oregon border, which happened to have prime growing conditions for the flowers, became known as the Easter Lily Capital of the World. After Pearl Harbour,

Japanese shipment of Easter lilies was cut off, which brought high demand to the Oregon and California growers, giving the flowers yet another nickname - White Gold.

Oregon and California now produce the majority of the world's Easter lilies, although there are only about 10 growers left. Easter lilies are difficult to grow, and the process to the final product is a long, precise one. The bulbs have to be cultivated in fields for at least three years, during which they require care, moving, and tending as they progress through growth stages. Once the bulbs are ready to be shipped, they're placed under strict temperature restrictions to ensure they bloom on time for Easter, which can be a gamble, considering Easter doesn't fall on the same day each year. So when you pick up an Easter lily at garden centres this year, keep in mind the years of work that got it to you!

The following poem by Louise Lewin Matthews captures the spiritual essence of the Easter Lily:

“Easter morn with lilies fair
Fills the church with perfumes rare,
As their clouds of incense rise,
Sweetest offerings to the skies.
Stately lilies pure and white
Flooding darkness with their light,
Bloom and sorrow drifts away,
On this holy hallow'd day.
Easter Lilies bending low
in the golden afterglow,
Bear a message from the sod
To the heavenly towers of God.”