

# The White Lilies - What are they?

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The familiar lilies with horizontal or nodding white flowers and scattered linear-lanceolate leaves are a source of many questions.

## **WHITE LILY, LIS BLANC**

*Lilium candidum* L.

Also called the Madonna Lily, this spectacular plant has bell-shaped flowers with the floral tube widening from the base. It originates from southern Europe and southwestern Asia, and possibly from the relatively restricted area of the Balkan Peninsula. It is a garden plant propagated from seeds and bulbs.

### **A floral emblem or not?**

The White Lily, Lis Blanc (*Lilium candidum*) was officially designated as the floral emblem of Quebec in 1963, but there has been confusion and debate as to whether it was the appropriate floral emblem. It was widely contested and the debate continued for 36 years until November 1999, when the Multi-coloured Blue Flag, L'Iris versicolore (*Iris versicolor* L.) was officially adopted as Quebec's new floral emblem. The change was considered by most to be desirable because the latter species is native rather than introduced and is a characteristic element of the flora of the most inhabited part of the province. *Iris versicolor* opens its flowers on or around St. Jean Baptiste Day which is Quebec's National holiday. The different colours of the flower signify a multicultural province. The Iris flower also has the advantage of resembling the "Fleur de lis" symbol which is on the coat of arms and the flag. It has been said that the "Fleur de lis" was the first floral symbol used in Quebec (since Jacques Cartier's arrival in 1534) but there is even some doubt that this symbol actually represented a plant. It does tie Quebec to France. A detailed and very illuminating discussion of the origins of the Quebec emblem is provided by Lamoureux (2002, pp. 368-371).

## **EASTER LILY, LIS DE PÂQUES**

*Lilium longiflorum* Thunb. var. *eximium* Baker

A large and vigorous variety of the White Trumpet Lily, the Easter Lily is dynamic yet delicate, bold yet reserved, and a striking plant of remarkable contrasts. It is as much a part of Easter as chocolate bunnies, egg hunts and special church services. It differs from



*EASTER LILY, LIS DE PÂQUES* (*Lilium longiflorum* Thunb. var. *eximium* Baker), a spectacular plant that serves as an excellent symbol of Easter. Photo used with permission of William Ferry of the Easter Lily Research Foundation.

*Lilium candidum* in having the floral tube widening relatively little from the base to the middle and in having longer flowers 4-7 inches long (instead of bell-shaped flowers 2-3 inches long). Believed to have been endemic to the Ryukyu Islands south of Japan, it has been widely introduced elsewhere. It is evidently the most important of the commercial lilies and is used at weddings and funerals, but Easter is the main event for Easter Lilies.

### **Economic aspects of Easter Lilies**

In the 1880s most of the cultivation of Easter Lilies

was in Bermuda. By 1900 Japan became the main supplier but this ended during the 1940s and the Pacific coast of North America became the main North American supplier. By 1945 1200 farmers were growing white gold (lily bulbs) on the Pacific coast from Vancouver to Long Beach.

Today most Easter Lilies for the potted market are grown in the mild and wet coastal region of the California/Oregon border often referred to as the Easter Lily Capital of the World. They are cultivated for 3-4 years in a 3-6 year rotation with pasture for cattle and sheep. Bulbs are dug up and replanted each year until they are mature. They are harvested in the fall and, when mature, are sold to greenhouse operators to produce flowering plants. Over 12 million bulbs are shipped to commercial greenhouses in the U.S. and Canada each year. In Michigan 560 growers are said to produce 1.3 million potted Easter Lilies valued at \$ 5 million each year. Following Michigan in production are California, Pennsylvania and Ohio. In the U.S., Easter Lilies have a wholesale value of approximately \$ 40 million and have occupied the fourth most valuable position following poinsettias, mums and azaleas. This is remarkable considering their short sales window of 2 weeks compared to 6 weeks to all year for the three leaders.

### Producing Easter Lilies

Easter lily producers have to ensure that all of their lilies bloom at the same time and are just in time for Easter. Easter is on a different day each year so the schedule is always being adjusted. It is the first Sunday after a full moon following spring equinox and can be anytime from the end of March to the end of April. The schedule is adjusted by counting leaves and measuring height to obtain an idea of when flowering will occur according to existing conditions and then modifying temperature and humidity of the greenhouse in order to slow or accelerate growth as required to ensure flowering on a particular date. Different cultivars vary in their time of flowering under similar condition from 85 to 120 days.

### References

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