**Holiday Flower: Easter Lily**

The Easter lily—known as *lilium longiflorum* by florists and botanists—has long been associated with Christianity, even though the plants themselves weren’t widely available to churches in the United States until after 1941.

Native to the Ryukyu Islands of southern Japan, the bulbs were mostly imported to the United States from that country until World War II, when supplies were cut off. After the war, with access limited, the bulbs became extremely valuable as growers scrambled to fill the void in their availability. Growers along the southern coast of Oregon had been cultivating the plant since 1919 when a soldier returning from the first world war brought a suitcase full of the bulbs back with him and shared them with friends and family.

That area of the country turned out to be the perfect climate. Today, in fact, more than 95 percent of all bulbs cultivated for growing potted Easter lilies are produced in a narrow coastal region that straddles the California-Oregon border—recognized by growers as the Easter Lily Capital of the World. Only a handful of farms today produce the bulbs.

Each fall, those growers harvest the bulbs, shipping them to commercial greenhouses that plant them in pots and then “force” them, under tightly controlled growing conditions, to bloom in time for the Easter holiday.

**Easter Lily Symbolism**

The white, trumpet-shaped flowers of the Easter lily symbolize purity, virtue, innocence, hope and life to many—the very essence of what Easter is all about. Biblical lore, in fact, tells the story of how the flowers were found growing in the garden of Gethsemane after Christ spent time praying there prior to his crucifixion. According to tradition, the lilies grew where drops of Christ’s sweat fell to the ground in his final hours of sorrow.

Christians also have long associated the pure white lily with the Virgin Mary. Legend tells the tale of how visitors to Mary’s tomb found it empty, her body replaced by a bunch of the sanctified flowers.

**Purchasing Easter Lilies**

When choosing your Easter lilies, select medium-to-compact plants. Flowers should be in various stages of opening. The buds will continue to open and bloom over time, extending your enjoyment of the plans.

Foliage on the plants should be abundant with dark, rich-green leaves. Check that foliage is dense and plentiful all the way to the soil line, which is a good sign that roots are active and healthy.

Avoid purchasing lilies still sheathed in protective sleeves. If the sleeves are on too long, the quality of the plants will suffer.

**Potted Easter Lily Care**

As each bud opens, remove the yellow anthers inside before the pollen starts to shed. The pollen will stain anything it touches, and some research shows that anther removal will prolong the life of the bloom. Remove blooms as they begin to wilt, fade and shrivel.

Keep your plant in a location with moderately cool temperatures, preferably from 60degrees to 65 degrees Fahrenheit. Keep them away from exterior doors that can expose them to cold drafts, and maintain some distance from fireplaces, heaters or furnace ducts. Provide exposure to bright, indirect natural daylight.

Water your plant when the soil surface is dry to the touch. To ensure the plant doesn’t become overwatered, remove it from its decorative sleeve or cover, place it in your sink and water until the soil is thoroughly soaked and water drips from the pot’s drain holes. Allow the plant to sit until all excess water has seeped out. Then replace it in its original decorative cover.

**Planting Your Easter Lily**

One of the greatest benefits of purchasing an Easter lily is that you can continue to enjoy the plant long after the holiday season is over. That’s because you can plant the flower in your garden as a perennial that will come back each year.

Choose a spot that is sunny with a well-drained mix of soil. Dig a hole about six inches deep and plant the Easter lily bulb so that the top is about 3 inches below ground level. Water immediately.

As the original plant dies back, cut the stem off at the soil surface. Soon after, you should see new growth emerge. While you might get lucky and experience a plant blooming with flowers that first summer, chances are you won’t see your plant put forth blossoms until the following summer.