

Garden Column for the Salisbury Post

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May 11, 2008

How war affects everything! Prior to World War II the vast majority of Easter Lilies were imported to the United States from Japan. Out of necessity, growers who were producing lilies as a hobby decided to go into the commercial growing business. In a narrow coastal region along the California and Oregon border, and down the Pacific coast from Vancouver, Canada to Long Beach, California, growers began to produce quality, consistent lily bulbs. According to the United States Department of Agriculture Easter Lilies have a wholesale value approaching \$40 million. Therefore the Easter lily ranks as the fourth largest crop behind only poinsettias, mums and azaleas.

Easter Lilies are prized for their beautiful, white trumpet-shaped flowers which are timed by the commercial growers to bloom during the Easter Holiday season. So how can we coax these marvelous plants to bloom again in our gardens located far from the west coast, the area of their probable origin?

Lilies do not survive well as houseplants but you can keep the plant thriving until all danger of frost is past by putting it in a window with bright indirect light and watering it thoroughly when slightly dry; over-watering may cause the bulb to rot. Remove blossoms as they fade but leave the flower stalk and foliage intact.

Select a bright sunny spot in the garden to plant the bulb. Remove the plant from the container and carefully loosen the root system. Even if some roots are torn, it is

better for the plant than leaving the compacted root system it had in its container. You may add a slow release fertilizer to the planting hole and apply again every six weeks during the growing season. Good drainage is the key to success with lilies. Plant bulbs twelve to eighteen inches apart in a hole deep enough so the roots can spread out and down as they naturally grow. Spread the soil around the roots, leaving no air pockets. Do not plant the bulb any deeper than it was planted in its container. Water the bulb thoroughly after planting.

Soon the old tops will wither and die. Cut them back to the soil surface. New growth will soon emerge and you may be rewarded with a second bloom later in the summer. More likely, you will have to wait until next June or July to see your Easter lilies bloom again. To improve your chances of over-wintering success, mulch the plants with at least four inches of straw or your favorite mulch in the fall. Carefully remove the mulch in the spring to allow new shoots to emerge.

Hopefully your Easter lily, the time-honored symbol of beauty, hope and life, will reward you with many seasons of blooms!

Karen Busby has just completed Master Gardener class of 2008.