

Bell County Master Gardeners
Tip of the Week
By Candy Mullen
Lilies

Everywhere you look this week, you have probably seen lilies being offered for sale. The traditional white Easter lily and many others such as Tiger lilies are quite common now. Lilies form an important group of flowering garden plants and are important culturally and in literature in much of the world. A few species are sometimes grown or harvested for the edible bulbs.

Lilium is a genus of herbaceous flowering plants growing from bulbs, all with large, prominent flowers. They comprise a genus of about 110 species in the lily family *Liliaceae*. Most species are native to the temperate northern hemisphere, though their range extends into the northern subtropics. The species in genus *Lilium* are true lilies. Many other plants have "lily" in their common names, some of which are quite unrelated to true lilies. Lilies are actually leafy-stemmed herbs.

The large flowers have six tepals. They are often fragrant, and come in a range of colors ranging through whites, yellows, oranges, pinks, reds and purples. Markings include spots and brush strokes. The plants are late spring or summer flowering. Sometimes they may also be grown as potted plants. A large number of ornamental hybrids have been developed. They can be used in herbaceous borders, woodland and shrub plantings, and as patio plants. *L. longiflorum*, sold for the Easter trade, is called the Easter lily or November lily, and is a plant native to the Ryukyu Islands (Japan) and Taiwan. It is a stem-rooting lily, growing up to 1 m high. It bears a number of trumpet shaped, white, fragrant, and outward facing flowers. While white represents death in many Asian cultures, it is simultaneously a symbol of purity and innocence in many European and American cultures.

Lilium bulbs are starchy and edible as root vegetables, although bulbs of some species may be very bitter. *Lilium davidii* var *unicolor* cotton are grown on a large scale in China as a luxury or health food, and are most often sold in dry form. They are eaten especially in the summer, for their perceived ability to reduce internal heat. They may be reconstituted and stir-fried, grated and used to thicken soup, or processed to extract starch. Their texture and taste draw comparisons with the potato, although the individual bulb scales are much smaller. *Yuri-ne* (lily-root) is also common in Japanese cuisine, especially as an ingredient of chawan-mushi (savory egg custard).

The "lily" flower buds known as "golden needles" in Chinese cuisine are actually from the daylily *Hemerocallis fulva*. This plant – despite its looks – is actually more closely related to asparagus than to true lilies. The Easter lily is a rich source of steroidal glycosides, a group of compounds that may be responsible for some of the traditional medicinal uses of lilies.

Many varieties of lily are extremely toxic to cats, causing acute renal failure even in small amounts. This is particularly true in the case of Easter lily plants, though other *Lilium* and the related *Hemerocallis* can also cause the same symptoms. From the 1890s to the early 1920s, there was a thriving export trade of bulbs from Bermuda to New York. A disease affected the Bermuda lilies and then most Easter lily bulbs arriving in the United States were imported from Japan before 1940s. The supply of bulbs was suddenly cut off after the attack on Pearl Harbor and Easter lilies became extremely valuable in the United States. Fortunately, we now have many choices of types and colors of lilies to plant in our gardens in Central Texas. They are easy to grow, multiply through the years, and give much beauty for the beholder. Think about planting some in your garden; you can't miss these plants!

Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact ask.bcmqa@gmail.com