

# Historical Survey of Easter Lily Name in Association with *Lilium longiflorum*

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## ABSTRACT

Based on the English dictionaries from around 1900, the author traces back how *Lilium longiflorum* came to be referred to as the Easter lily. The term "Easter lily" was given to any lily-like flowering species that bloomed around the Easter day, being called Easter flowers. Among them, *L. candidum* became the most famous one known as "Easter lily". The evidence suggests that when more easily forcible bulb production began in the Bermuda Islands, the superiority of *L. longiflorum* over *L. candidum* in forcing ability and price, might have led to an explosive promotion of the usage of *L. longiflorum* as the Easter flower instead of *L. candidum*. Thus, the name "Easter lily" came to be transferred from *L. candidum* to *L. longiflorum*.

**Keywords:** Easter decoration, Easter flower, *Lilium candidum*, Madonna lily

## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	9
EASTER FLOWER AND EASTER LILY .....	9
"EASTER LILY" CHANGED FROM <i>L. CANDIDUM</i> TO <i>L. LONGIFLORUM</i> .....	10
FROM BERMUDA EASTER LILY TO EASTER LILY.....	10
CONCLUSIONS.....	10
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	11
REFERENCES.....	11

## INTRODUCTION

When the author was staying in the Netherlands for one year from September 1982 to August 1983, he was very surprised to find that referring to *Lilium longiflorum* as the "Easter Lily" was not as popular in the Netherlands or Europe as in the U.S.A. and Japan. Because the author at that time had no doubt that Easter lily, which means Easter flower, used for church and other decorations for Easter day, was the most popular name for *L. longiflorum* all over the world. Japanese lily professionals such as researchers, breeders, growers and retailers referred to the English name of *L. longiflorum* solely as "Easter lily", although he knew other vernacular names for the species also, such as "white trumpet lily", "Bermuda lily", "Blunderbuss lily", "long-tubed lily", and "church lily" (Tsukamoto 1965; Saishin Engei Daijiten Henshuu Iinkai 1969). This surprising difference in usage of names, and the many common or trade names of *L. longiflorum* aroused the author's interest in surveying how and when this species got the name of "Easter lily". This study therefore was designed to trace the history and speculate on how *L. longiflorum* came to be referred to as Easter lily, starting with a survey of English dictionaries mainly published around 1900. Dictionaries are a linguistic "fossil record".

## EASTER FLOWER AND EASTER LILY

Christian people decorate with flowers on Easter day, which are called "Easter flowers". For this purpose, spring blooming flowers were used originally since Easter always

falls in March to April in Gregorian calendar, and April to early May, when the Julian date is converted to the Gregorian date. This is similar to the case of the Japanese "Bon-bana", which signifies flowers served to the ancestral soul, placed in front of tombs during the Obon days; originally 13-16 June in Lunar calendar, but now other days of celebration such as 13-16 June, 13-16 August, or 28 August -2 September in Gregorian calendar with different areas, respectively (Ishizuka 1986). Families make offerings of flowers which bloom around the Obon days. The climate of Japan is different in different areas, resulting in differences in the kinds of "Bon-bana" flowers used in the various regions.

In 1878-84 Britten and Holland mentioned the name "Madonna lily" (*L. candidum*) but not "Easter lily" as English plant-name. In a dialect dictionary Wright and Pitt (1898) wrote a word "Easter lily" without any explanation (Table 1), i.e. it is no clear what plants were referred to as "Easter lily". This suggests the following Mathew's explanation (1951) might be popular understanding at that time; Easter lily is "any one of various flowers used for decorative purposes at Easter, (now usually *Lilium longiflorum*)..."

According to Ishii (1956) the Latin name of *Lilium* is derived from the old Celtic "li" (white) and "lium" (flower). Thus, the name "Easter lily" means "white flower for Easter decoration", resulting in the fact that Easter flower and Easter lily are equally used for the flowers for Easter decoration.

Moreover, it is recorded that "The pure white lily has long been closely associated with the Virgin Mary" (Ishii

1956; Texas AgriLife Extension Service 2011). From these accounts it can be inferred that there would be many spring flowering white plants that could be used as Easter decoration, e.g. Easter lilies, although Easter flowers also included many more spring flowering plants with different colors. In reality, there are many spring flowering white plants, in addition to *L. longiflorum*, which have been referred to as Easter lily, e.g. Atamasco lily (*Zephyranthes atamasco*), *Calla* spp., daffodil (*Narcissus pseudonarcissus*), Madonna lily (*Lilium candidum*), Dog-tooth violet (*Erythronium* spp.), *Trillium* spp., Zephyr lily (*Zephyranthes atamasco*), etc. (DARE 1991; Gove 1961).

Ootsuka (1929) mentioned that *L. candidum* was the first flower to become famous as the Easter lily because of its use for Easter decoration. *L. candidum* has white colored flower as shown by another name "White lily" (Beeton 1896). However, other documents (Ishii 1956; Texas AgriLife Extension Service 2011) give an alternative account such as "A mark of purity and grace throughout the ages, the regale white lily is a fitting symbol of the greater meaning of Easter". If so, this regal lily (*L. regale*) might have been substituted with the use *L. candidum* for a mark of purity and grace, as a consequence of the development of forcing culture under warmed conditions, such as under glass or with stove heating, which made it possible to produce *L. candidum* flowers for the Easter decoration. Thus, it is possible that this advance in horticultural production technology resulted in the name "Easter lily", being bestowed on *L. candidum*.

Before *L. longiflorum* became popular as one of the Easter flowers, *L. candidum* was referred to as not only "White lily" from its flower color, and Easter lily, i.e. white lily for Easter flower, but also "Madonna lily" and "Annunciation lily" (The Times Book Club 1909). This may be dependent on early painting depicting the angel Gabriel extending to the Virgin Mary a branch of pure white lilies, announcing that she is to be the mother of the Christ child (Texas AgriLife Extension Service 2011).

This reference adds the following poem, by Louise Lewin Matthews, which captures the spiritual essence of the Easter lily:

*Easter morn with lilies fair  
Fills the church with perfumes rare,  
As their clouds of increase rise,  
Sweetest offerings to the skies.  
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.*

The above history might have given rise to people bestowing *L. candidum* names such as the Madonna lily or the Annunciation lily.

### "EASTER LILY" CHANGED FROM *L. CANDIDUM* TO *L. LONGIFLORUM*

Well then how did *L. candidum* get given the name Easter lily or Resurrection lily? In other words, how did *L. candidum* come to be used for Easter decoration as the Easter lily? At Easter time, churches continued to adorn their altars and crosses with masses of Easter lilies, to commemorate the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Texas AgriLife Extension Service 2011). Early writers and artists made the lily the symbol of the Easter and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and also, by extension, the Resurrection of Mary (Texas AgriLife Extension Service 2011). This gave *L. candidum* the other names of "Easter lily" and/or "Resurrection lily".

According to Mathews (1951), "now usually *Lilium longiflorum*" is referred to as Easter lily. How did *L. longiflorum* acquire the name of Easter lily in place of *L. candidum*? There may be two reasons for this phenomenon.

The first one is as follows: In the U.S.A. in the 1880s,

increase in bulb production in the Bermuda Islands made it possible to use exclusively *L. longiflorum* flowers for the Easter decoration (Bailey 1901). This may have been dependent on the relatively easy ability for forcing of flowering in *L. longiflorum* being greater than that for *L. candidum* (Ishii 1956) such that *L. longiflorum* flowers would have been on sale at cheaper prices than *L. candidum* flowers. This superiority of *L. longiflorum* over *L. candidum* might have led to an explosive promotion of the usage of *L. longiflorum* as the Easter flower, i.e. Easter lily, whose bulbs were produced in and shipped from the Bermuda Islands (Bailey 1901), resulting in the Bermuda *L. longiflorum* being called the "Bermuda Easter lily" or the "Bermuda lily".

The second one is that as *L. longiflorum* is an exceedingly important commercial crop (Bailey 1919), the name Easter lily of *L. longiflorum* enlarged from traders to growers, growers to retailers, and retailers to citizen. Such could be conjectured by the data where horticultural professional's documents solely referred to *L. longiflorum* as Easter lily instead of other plants, but general ones introduced many other plants called as Easter lily (Table 1).

Moreover, Table 1 indicates that professionals in horticulture used solely Easter lily or Bermuda (Easter) lily for *L. longiflorum*. Why such phenomenon happened? This indicates that horticulturists were good at botany and knew the classification of *Lilium*, so they avoided any confusion derived from using the above-mentioned many names for *L. longiflorum*. Thus, *L. longiflorum* got a prize, it alone now being called "Easter lily", taking over from all other Easter flowers.

### FROM BERMUDA EASTER LILY TO EASTER LILY

There are many names for *L. longiflorum*, such as Bermuda lily, Bermuda Easter lily, Blunderbuss lily, Common Easter lily, Common trumpet lily, Church lily, Hurris's lily, Long-tubed lily, White trumpet lily, etc. (Tsukamoto 1965; Saishin Engei Daijiten Henshuu Iinkai 1969). Among these titles, why has "Easter lily" become fixed to *L. longiflorum* as the popular name?

As mentioned above, *L. candidum* (Madonna lily, Annunciation lily) for Easter decoration was substituted by the more easily forcible *L. longiflorum* produced in the Bermuda Islands during 1880s (Wilson 1929; Kobayashi 1999). Thus *L. longiflorum* came to be known in America as the Bermuda Easter lily, at first in order to distinguish it from the Easter lily of *L. candidum*, but later the name was shortened just to "Easter lily", which has become popular, now being fixed as the name for *L. longiflorum* exclusively.

After some boom years of production, around the mid 1880s, the *L. longiflorum* industry in Bermuda was ravaged and ruined by disease (Wilson 1929). As a result, the importation of *L. longiflorum* bulbs from Japan to the U.S.A. was promoted, and it continued to dominate the U.S. export market until the start of World War II (Kobayashi 1999). In 1919 bulb production began in Oregon, U.S.A. (Texas AgriLife Extension Service 2011). As Bermuda bulbs were not used for Easter flower production any more, the name of Bermuda lily or Bermuda Easter lily for *L. longiflorum* was no longer suitable, because these bulbs are not produced in Bermuda any more. This caused the decline in these older names, and only "Easter lily", i.e. white flower for Easter decoration has survived for *L. longiflorum*.

### CONCLUSIONS

More easily forcible bulb production of *L. longiflorum* in Bermuda in the 1880s gave this species the name Bermuda "Easter lily", in place of that common name referring to *L. candidum*. However, when the bulb production was ruined in Bermuda at the end of 1880s and Japanese *L. longiflorum* bulbs were imported and used for Easter decorative lilies in the U.S.A., the shortened name "Easter lily" came to be used for *L. longiflorum*, because both sources of bulbs

**Table 1** Plant species referred to as Easter lily in English dictionaries, books and magazines (1878-1940).

Year	Index word <sup>Z</sup>	<i>Lilium longiflorum</i>	Madonna lily <i>L. candidum</i>	Atamasco lily <i>Zephyranthes atamasco</i>	Daffodil <i>Narcissus</i> spp.	Any other species <sup>Y</sup>	References
1878-84	x						Britten and Holland 1878-84
1890	x						Porter 1890
<b>1896</b>	<b>x</b>						<b>Beeton 1896</b>
1898	Easter <sup>W</sup>						Wright 1898
1898	x						Hunter and Morris 1898
<b>1900</b>	<b><i>L. longiflorum</i></b>	○					<b>Cook 1900</b>
<b>1900</b>	<b>x</b>						<b>Drury 1900</b>
<b>1901</b>	<b>Lily</b>	○					<b>Bailey 1901</b>
1901	Annunciation lily <sup>W</sup>		○				Harris 1901
<b>1901</b>	<b>x</b>						<b>Hayes 1901</b>
<b>1901</b>	<b><i>Lilium</i></b>	○					<b>Nicholson 1901</b>
1903	Lily	○					Beach 1903
1903	x						Whitney 1903
1907	x						Goodrich 1907
<b>1908</b>	<b>x</b>						<b>Watson 1908</b>
1909	Easter lily; Lily	○	○	○	○		The Times Book Club 1909
1913	Lily	○	○	○	○		Funk 1913
<b>1914</b>	<b>x</b>						<b>Lowther 1914</b>
<b>1919</b>	<b><i>Lilium</i></b>	○					<b>Bailey 1919</b>
1920	Easter lily	○	○	○	○	○	Harris 1920
<b>1921</b>	<b>(Article's title)</b>	○					<b>Griffiths (Okada 1952b)</b>
1927	Easter lily	○	○	○	○	○	Emery and Brewster 1927
1929	x						Black and Black 1929
1933	x						Murray et al. 1933
<b>1935</b>	<b>Lily</b>	○					<b>Bailey and Bailey 1935</b>
<b>1935</b>	<b>(Article's title)</b>	○					<b>Pfeiffer (Okada 1952b)</b>
<b>1936</b>	<b>(Article's title)</b>	○					<b>Brierley et al. (Okada 1952a)</b>
<b>1936</b>	<b>Lily</b>	○					<b>Seymour 1936</b>
1940	Easter lily	○	○	○		○	Craigie and Hulbert 1940

N.B. Bold-italicized documents deal with topics about horticulture/gardening and the remainders do general ones.

<sup>Z</sup> "Easter lily" was found in this index word. X indicates that Easter lily was not written.

<sup>Y</sup> Any other spring flowering plants, including some examples.

<sup>W</sup> Word "Easter lily" was written without any description.

belonged to *L. longiflorum*, and the Bermuda bulbs were not used any more for Easter decorative lily production. These circumstances led to the name "Easter lily" being fixed exclusively on *L. longiflorum*, especially among horticulturists, in the early 1900s.

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