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

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 Henshu 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 “ium” (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...
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 atamasca), daffodil (Narcissus pseudonarcissus), Madonna lily (Lilium candidum), Dog-tooth violet (Erythronium spp.), Trillium spp., Zephyr lily (Zephyranthes atamasca), 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 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.
Flocking 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 commerorate the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Texas AgriLife Extension Service 2011). Early writers and artists gave 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 (Beiley 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 professionals’ 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).

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).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Index word</th>
<th><em>Lilium longiflorum</em></th>
<th><em>Madonna lily</em></th>
<th><em>Atamasco lily</em></th>
<th><em>Daffodil</em></th>
<th>Any other species</th>
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<td>1898</td>
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N.B. Bold-italicized documents deal with topics about horticulture/gardening and the remainders do general ones.

A "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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