

# Calendar

## Resurrection Guaranteed

### *The Brief Life of an Easter Lily*

**T**he description of their plight isn't enviable: "Forced to bloom for the holiday." What if they're not in the holiday mood? Tough luck for Easter lilies. Like poinsettias at Christmas, these flowers with their white megaphone-shaped blossoms are another seasonal plant that many of us demand. Then in no time we find they look dated. We throw them away, even though horticulturists say that with a little effort they could be planted and grown successfully outdoors.

Some 13 million Easter lilies annually are treated this way in the United States and Canada.

#### LOCAL EVENTS

Retailers call the two-week period we're in right

now the "sales window" for them. There is no narrower one for a holiday plant.

In San Diego, those who buy them at Vons or other supermarkets may be getting a plant from Milgro Nursery, Inc. It grows 280,000 of them in Oxnard and in its facility in southern Utah. Reached by phone last week, Bob Bell, vice president of marketing, hesitated to say how many Milgro plants will be sold here, because it's too hard to keep track of their final destination. "They go all over the United States, but mainly California to Washington." Besides, Bell was in a hurry. "There's stuff ready to ship and stuff still 'tight,'" he said, referring to the unopened state of the buds. "We stage it so we can keep it fresh. We ship it as a puffy bud, so it'll open one day after it hits the stores."

It sounded like pressure to get the timing right.

"Correct," said Bell, who shortly excused himself to return to his charges before the moveable feast was upon him.

One area outlet that Milgro supplies is Sunshine Growers Nursery in Ontario. When Sunshine was asked about lilies, someone called "the Easter lily lady" was dispatched. Sunshine's manager is Cobi Neal. The company sells about 850 plants a year, mostly to churches, Neal said. "The plants are usually just in bud when we get them and start opening up almost immediately."

Less in a hurry than Bell, because the plants hadn't yet arrived, Neal distinguished between Easter lilies and those used at funerals. "The lilies at funerals are more of a calla lily. Those are grown pretty much year-round." As for the smell we all associate with death, thanks to those lilies: "Easter



Easter lily

lilies do have a fragrance, but they're not as fragrant as the calla."

Bent Petersen, green-goods buyer for Armstrong Garden Centers, could spare a moment, too, because his plants hadn't arrived yet either. Speaking from company headquarters in Glendora, he said there were about 3000 coming from a grower in Monterey Bay. "When we first receive them, they should just barely be beginning to crack open. And in the next few days, they should open fully. It depends on the heat how fast it goes." With those, he'll supply all Armstrong stores in San Diego and Los Angeles. "We also get orders from churches for 50 to 100 at a time."

Petersen acknowledged that Easter lilies are "really a very short-lived" plant, at least when used as a seasonal decoration. To prolong their life, and also to keep them from being "messy" with their pollen, he suggested the removal of their yellow centers. Neal, of Sunshine, advised the same. So did Balboa Park horticulturist Kathy Pupilava, except that she called those centers by their proper name —

"anthers."

"Pinch off the anthers once the flower opens," she said. "The yellow pollen not only discolors the flower, but if a flower gets pollinated, it dies sooner."

Pupilava is caring for the 200 Easter lilies currently on display in the Botanical Building. Those plants were grown for her by Escondido's Brouwer Nursery, which got the bulbs from a purveyor in Northern California.

Over 95 percent of all Easter lily bulbs are produced along a narrow stretch of coastline straddling the southern Oregon and California border, Pupilava said.

The businesses that used to grow them farther south were wiped out by aphids, bad weather, and their inability to compete with the increasingly larger businesses northward. Today only ten farms produce all those millions of bulbs that each Easter we can't live without.

What will happen to the Botanical Building's bulbs after Easter is over?

"They can be planted out in the park in different areas," Pupilava said.

Of course, "can" isn't "will."

"But they don't automatically bloom at Easter time," she said, speaking more generally now. "They'll come up later in the summer."

Of the fact that most people won't plant the lilies they buy, Pupilava said, "I don't blame them. Most people aren't gardeners."

For those who do want to try it, she advised this: "Don't cut the stalk prematurely, or the bulb won't be able to store enough energy for itself. The leaves and the stem should be left alone to make chlorophyll and then allowed to die back naturally."

That done, she said in so many words, chances are good for their resurrection.

— Jeanne Schinto

**Easter Lily Display**  
**Friday through Wednesday,**  
**10:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m.**  
**Botanical Building**  
**Balboa Park**  
**Free**  
**Info: 619-239-0512 or**  
**www.balboapark.com**

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