

The Green Thumb

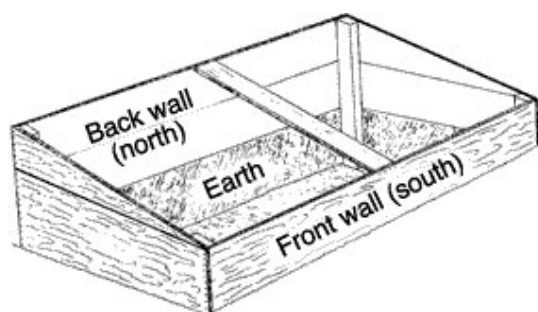
Lawn and Garden News You Can Use

March 2008

Get a Head Start on the Garden Season

If you're one of those gardeners who likes to get a head start on the growing season, you might want to build a cold frame.

A cold frame is a simple structure that provides warmth from the sun and blocks the wind. The sun's rays enter through a transparent cover, creating a greenhouse effect that heats the interior.



A cold frame allows you to expand the growing season one to three months. Many gardeners use cold frames to harden off transplants. But, you can also raise a few salad vegetables. Lettuce, radishes, and scallions will grow to full size in a cold frame before their regular outdoor planting season. And in the fall, you can grow these same crops in the cold frame through November. You can even use a cold frame in the winter to force bulbs, store root vegetables, or propagate trees and shrubs by hardwood cuttings.

Permanent cold frames should be sturdy enough to withstand years of sun and weather. Most cold frames are made of wood and have a hinged covering. Wood and glass windows make a great covering, but they are heavy and breakable. Other

options are covers made of plexiglass or a double layer of clear plastic. Doubling the plastic creates dead air space for additional insulation in the cover.

Cold frame lids should be hinged for easy opening. On a sunny day, air in the cold frame can get too hot for plants. So, you need to prop open the lid to allow cool air in. Some mail-order garden centers offer temperature-controlled cold frame hinges that automatically open and close to vent the frame.

Ideally, cold frames should be located against a south or east wall near the building foundation to take advantage of its heat. Portable cold frames built of lightweight material allow you to move the frame to different sun exposures as seasons and plants change. Portable frames can also be set on concrete blocks or bricks to add height for tall plants.

You can turn a cold frame into a hot bed by adding heating cables. The bottom heat of a hot bed encourages root growth in plants. A waterproof, thermostatically controlled heating cable should be buried in a layer of sand 2 inches beneath the plants. Another heating method is to place fresh manure in the bottom of the cold frame. As the manure decomposes, it releases heat and creates a natural hot bed.

With a hot bed, vegetable and flower seeds can sprout and grow in sunlight instead of artificial light. Many seedlings require constant warm soil temperatures to germinate, so a hot bed gets them off to a better start.

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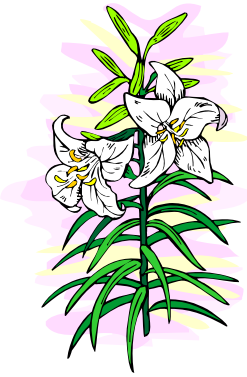
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Caring for Your Easter Lily

Martha Smith, horticulture educator



The Easter season is a time of joy both for the religious significance and the promise of spring. What better symbol for the season than the Easter lily? With its beautiful, clear, 6- to 8-inch-long, bell-like white flowers and its wonderful fragrance, this plant offers a sense of peace and hope for the coming spring and summer seasons.

Lilium longiflorum is the Latin name for the common Easter lily. Popular cultivars are “Ace,” which grows to 18 inches, “Croft,” which grows to 24 inches, and “Estate,” which can reach 3 feet in height.

Care for your Easter lily during the holiday is easy. They do best in indirect, bright light or curtain-filtered sunlight when in flower. Cool, nighttime temperatures between 40 and 50 degrees help extend the bloom period. Daytime temperatures no higher than 68 degrees are ideal. Keep the soil moist while in flower, but don’t fertilize at this time.

Inside the white, bell-like flowers are pollen-bearing golden anthers, or the male part of the flower. Most people prefer to remove these because by removing the pollen, the flower doesn’t become pollinated, so the theory is the blossoms last longer.

Another more practical reason is that the golden yellow pollen stains clothing if someone brushes up against the plant. The pollen also stains the white flowers. The anthers are easily removed as soon as the flower opens, which is usually before the pollen is freed. Just reach in and gently twist and pull, or use a pair of scissors.

Post-holiday care is also easy. After the flowers fade, remove the lily flowers and clip any browning leaves. Place the plants in a sunny area and water as the foliage matures. As soon as the danger of frost is past, plant the lily in a sunny, well-drained garden spot.

The real bloom time for Easter lilies is mid- to late summer; they have been forced for Easter bloom. Place the bulbs a few inches deeper than they were in the pot. Apply an all-purpose garden fertilizer at this time. The old top will wither and die, but soon afterwards, new shoots should emerge and the plant will bloom again in July or August.

The Easter lily is not 100 percent hardy in Illinois. Many people get good results by using winter protection, but do realize you may lose them in a very cold winter.

Forcing them indoors for Easter bloom is tricky. Professional growers are always challenged due to the fact that Easter is never at the same time from year to year. With Christmas poinsettias, growers can follow a traditional calendar method—but not so with Easter lilies.

A method known as leaf counting is often the most reliable for scheduling Easter lilies. If you want to try forcing your Easter lily, do not let it flower in July or August. You will have to de-bud the plant at this time. Allowing the bulb to flower outdoors weakens the bulbs for indoor forcing.

The plant must be dug up before the chance of fall frost. Plant the bulb in a pot about the same size as the original pot. Place the bulb as low in the pot as possible and add potting soil only to the top of the bulb. Water thoroughly and keep as near to 45 to 50 degrees as possible through January 1.

During this time, only water to prevent drying out. After January 1, put the plant in a sunny window, water, and fertilize as with any houseplant. Add the remainder of the soil needed to fill the pot to near the rim after the stem has grown 3 to 4 inches tall.

If staking is necessary, place the stake near the pot wall instead of through the bulb. After the first buds turn white, keep the plant out of direct sunlight.

Question Corner

Answer provided by David Robson, horticulture educator

Q. I'd like to have a nice looking lawn this year. Any tips you could suggest?

A. All spring lawn care activity should be aimed at increasing the plant's root system and shoot density. However, many of the usual spring practices do the opposite.

Fertilizing in April is considered normal, but it is actually one of the worst things to do. Fertilizing stimulates top growth at the expense of root growth. The lawn will develop an attractive color and thicken, but the root system will lag behind. As long as temperatures remain on the cool side, no noticeable effect is viewed. But, when temperatures warm, the root system struggles to provide adequate moisture to keep blades and crowns alive.

In southern Illinois, we generally forego spring fertilizing until mid-May. Around Mother's Day, supply the lawn with 1 pound of actual nitrogen per 1000 square feet to increase shoot growth for the summer. It may take time to adjust to the concept of late spring fertilizing, especially



if the neighbor's lawn looks greener and thicker. But like all landscape care, the long-term results are better than the short-term ones.

The first week of April is the time to apply crabgrass control. Crabgrass is a warm-season annual weed with a leaf blade three to four times as thick as bluegrass. The difference in appearance contributes to crabgrass's weedy nature. Crabgrass germinates when temperatures are above 55 degrees for 5 to 7 consecutive days.

Pre-emergence herbicides provide the best weed control. Follow directions on the package and water in because pre-emergence chemicals have little effect if they are not near the weed seed as it germinates. Avoid using pre-emergence controls if overseeding is necessary. Most chemicals are unable to distinguish between weed seed and grass seed. While pre-emergence weed control and fertilizer combinations are available, it's still best to wait until May before fertilizing.

Other spring practices to consider include de-thatching, aerating and overseeding.

Finally, start mowing the lawn as soon as it needs it. Before you start up the mower, pick up debris such as sticks and twigs.

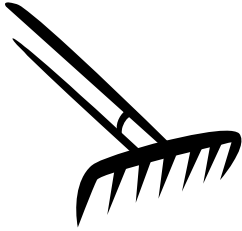


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Groundcovers for the Landscape



Groundcover plants can solve problems and unify your landscape. They provide dense soil cover, retard weed growth, and prevent soil erosion. Groundcovers range in height from an inch to 4 feet. They can be woody or herbaceous; clumping or running; evergreen or deciduous. There is a broad array of colors and textures to choose from.

Groundcovers can also unify different components in the landscape. Non-spreading types of groundcovers can be used as hedging material, traffic barriers, or visual guides toward an entry. They soften hardscapes such as walks, steps, and driveways.

Groundcovers help to define space. A low groundcover can provide a transition between the lawn and the taller plants in beds. Attractive foliage, colorful flowers and, at times, attractive fruit can add color and texture to an otherwise "green" landscape.

Groundcovers create various moods. Small-leaved, smooth-textured groundcovers used in broad, curved plantings convey a feeling of spaciousness. Whereas large-leaved, coarse-textured groundcovers create a feeling of closeness.

For more ideas on using groundcovers, visit *From the Ground Up* at <http://www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/groundcovers/>. The site contains lots of information and a photo directory of 35 groundcovers.



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