

# Growing Asiatic Lilies in the Valley of the Sun

People are sometimes surprised to see lilies growing here in the desert, but some kinds are tougher plants than most people give them credit for. The ancestors of Asiatic lilies come from the eastern part of the Middle East, to western China, and their hybrids adapt well to hot, dry climates and moderate winters. They also bloom earlier than the other lily groups, so the summer heat is less likely to damage the blooms. Here is a quick overview of the way to grow them in the Valley:

## Planting Time

Plant lily bulbs as early as they are available. November is ideal, though they are often not available until January or February. Later planting equals later blooming, which may cause some heat damage the first year.

## Sun Exposure

Asiatic lilies do best with morning sun—until about noon or 1:00 pm—or 50% filtered shade. Too much shade prevents bloom, while too much sun can damage the blooms in a late spring heatwave.

## Soil

Fast draining, sandy soil works best. To improve normal mid-Valley adobe clay, mix it at least one foot deep in the following proportions: one part sand, three parts native soil, and two parts compost. Mixing in three cups of Berridge Rose Food and one cup of soil sulfur per square yard at the same time will help the bulbs get off to a good start. The sandy-gravelly soils found in the mountain foothills will also benefit from compost, rose food, and sulfur, as well as having some of the rocks sifted out, but the main thing to consider is whether there is a layer of caliche stopping the drainage.

## Planting

Once the bed is ready, plant the bulbs around 10-18 inches apart, and about 6 inches deep: they will need room to multiply, and most of the roots form on the stem that rises from the bulb—not on the bulb itself. Water the bed deeply after planting, at least four inches of water on the soil surface, to settle the soil and start rooting.

## Watering

Water deeply but infrequently—about every two weeks—until the leaves start to emerge, then water about once a week until after bloom. Water once every 10 to 14 days until the leaves mostly turn yellow, then keep it on the dry side until the new sprouts emerge in fall.

## Feeding

Feed monthly with a slow acting, high nitrogen fertilizer—such as Berridge Tree & Shrub Food—from shoot emergence until the leaves turn yellow. They can survive with less food, but this improves growth and bloom in our poor soils.

## Aftercare

Once the flowers have faded, snip them off to prevent seed setting, but leave the leaves to produce food for next year's bloom. Once the leafy stem has turned completely brown, cut it off at ground level. Be sure to mark the spot so you don't accidentally dig the bulbs up in the summer. After several years, the bulbs might be starting to get crowded. Dig the clump out in November, and gently separate the bulbs, keeping as many of the big ones as you want—little bulbs and even separated scales will grow, but may not bloom for two or more years. Replant bulbs immediately: lily bulbs have a very short shelf life.

Newer hybrid groups are worth trying here in the Valley: LA hybrids (crosses between Easter Lilies and Asiatic hybrids) have more cup-shaped, fragrant blooms in the Asiatic color range. OA hybrids (crosses between Oriental hybrids and Asiatic hybrids) have large, open, lightly fragrant flowers in soft pinks, creams, and apricot shades. These new hybrids may be later blooming, and so may need a little more shade.