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# Atamasco Lily, *Zephyranthes atamasca*

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## Atamasco Lily

### *Zephyranthes atamasca*

Simple and pure, Atamasco lilies were among the first of many beautiful wildflowers to be noticed by the Jamestown colonists as they explored the tidewater region of southeastern Virginia.

A perennial herb that grows from a subterranean bulb, the leaves are glossy green, linear, flat to somewhat concave, up to one half inch wide and approximately one foot in length. The species name, *atamasca*, is attributed to Tapehanek words meaning under grass, in reference to the location of the bulb under grass-like leaves. Overall the plant is rather grass-like. Flowers are erect to slightly inclined. As in many lilies, sepals and petals are only subtly distinguished, so the term tepal is often used to describe the perianth elements.


Six tepals are fused at their bases forming a gradually flaring funnel-like structure that may be up to one inch in length. Above the greenish funnel-like portion, the individual tepals separate, flare laterally, and take on a white coloration. Sometimes the perianth lobes are tinged with pink or purple, especially as the flower ages. From base to tip the flowers are approximately three inches long. Overall, flower form is reminiscent of a small trumpet lily, and an alternative common name is Easter lily.

The genus *Zephyranthes* contains about 50 species found from the southeast United States to Argentina. Sixteen species occur in the United States, mostly in Florida, Texas and the intervening Gulf coast region.

Many species of the genus live in seasonally dry regions where they emerge from dormancy and produce flowers in a rapid response to infrequent heavy rainstorms; this physiological characteristic is responsible for common names like rain lily, fairy lily and zephyr lily that are applied to many species of *Zephyranthes*.

*Zephyranthes* is classified in the family *Amaryllidaceae*, or amaryllis family. As such it is related to a host of showy horticultural species and hybrids such as the familiar daffodils (*Narcissus*), florist's amaryllis (*Hippeastrum*), snowdrops (*Galanthus*) and snowflake (*Leucojum*), to mention a few.

The Atamasco lily is found in low woods and wet meadows. It readily colonizes road shoulders in areas of appropriate habitat, apparently benefiting from the extra light and decreased competition in this non-natural setting. In Virginia it flowers in April or May and fruits mature by May or June.

The bulbs are frost-sensitive, so cultivation is feasible only in areas that experience minimal amounts of freezing in winter. Atamasco lilies spontaneously reproduce by offset bulbs, resulting in a vigorous colony. Atamasco lily makes a handsome addition to wildflower gardens. 

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|                       |                           |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| <b>Type of Plant</b>  | Perennial                 |
| <b>Family</b>         | Amaryllidaceae            |
| <b>Height</b>         | 12"                       |
| <b>Habitat</b>        | Moderate                  |
| <b>Rate of Growth</b> | Moderate                  |
| <b>Sun</b>            | Full sun to partial shade |
| <b>Soil</b>           | Moist                     |
| <b>Propagation</b>    | Division                  |
| <b>Range</b>          | Southeastern U.S.         |