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### *Lilium candidum*

**MADONNA LILY** is a bulbous perennial. Native to south-eastern Europe (particularly the Balkans, and possibly Lebanon and Israel), it has large, yellow-based inside, white flowers with golden-yellow stamens and a strong and sweet, penetrating scent.

It is also known as *Açucena* (Portuguese), *Ak zambak* (Turkish), Annunciation lily, Ascension lily, *Azucena* (Spanish), Bourbon lily, Easter lily, *Fleur de liss* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), French lily, Juno's rose, *Lalia biela* (Slovak), *Lilie* (German), *Lilie bělostná* (Czech), Lily, *Lis blanc* (French), *Lis de la Madone* (French), *Madonnalilja* (Swedish), *Madonnen-lilie* (German), *Marienlilie* (German), Meadow lily, Our Lady's lily, St. Joseph's lily, *Weisse Lilie* (German), and White lily; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of bashfulness, beatitude, celestial beauty, chastity, divine nuptials, eternal love, grace, heavenly bliss, purity, purity and modesty, queenliness, showiness, and sinlessness.

The bulbs are harvested in late Summer and the rich mucilage (sticky substance) is extracted. *Candidum* means 'pure glossy white, shining or pure white'.

It is only since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century that the plant has been known as Madonna lily. Before that it was commonly known as White lily.

It has been cultivated since at least 2000 BC and is featured in Cretan frescos dating back to that time. Some authorities suspect madonna lily's cultivation began before then as it has been found depicted on some artefacts from an even earlier period. Certainly it is believed that Madonna lily was one of the flowers cultivated in ancient Egypt both for its beauty and as an ingredient for perfume but authorities do not know from what date this would have begun.

The graceful shape of madonna lily was inspiration for early designs and architectural motifs. An example of the latter was the tops of the pillars of Solomon's temple in Israel. (The early 21<sup>st</sup> Century saw ongoing debate among some scholars as to the actual existence of Solomon's temple for which apparently archaeological evidence was slim to that date if not non-existent although evidence of similar temples elsewhere in the Middle East had been found.)

In Greek mythology the flower was dedicated to Hera, wife of Zeus and goddess of marriage and childbirth. In Roman mythology Jupiter arranges for Juno (Zeus and Hera's counterparts) to receive a sleeping draught. While under the effects of this the baby Hercules is fed at her breast so that he may acquire immortality from her milk. In his eagerness to suckle however some drops of milk escaped and those that fell on the heavens formed the Milky Way while the others that fell on the earth were transformed into madonna lilies.

Christian legend suggests an alternative story and tells how the lily grew out of Eve's tears as she left the Garden of Eden. Some authorities indicate that this flower could be the Rose of Sharon mentioned in the *Bible*. The lily is dedicated to Jesus Christ and to the Virgin Mary and appears in many of the old masters' paintings. The flower is used to represent good works, innocence, the Annunciation (when the angel came to the Virgin Mary) and the 'joyful mysteries of the rosary'. It is also the flower of Easter in the Christian calendar and represents the spirit of the age to come.

The madonna lily, certainly evident in Britain from the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, is believed to have been introduced there about a century earlier towards the end of the Crusades, probably from Israel or Lebanon. It is interesting to note that in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century this is believed to have been the only species of lily known to the celebrated English playwright, poet and actor/manager, William Shakespeare (1564-1616).

There are contradictory English superstitions connected with the plant: Among these a mass of flowers indicated cheaper bread, the flowers generally are a symbol of death, smelling the lily could cause freckles, dreaming of this lily presaged good luck, and in the Midlands its growth in a garden was thought to repel ghosts. To dream of madonna lily is also said to indicate a solitary life.

In North America madonna lily was the Easter lily (unless Easter was late) until it was superseded in the 1880s by another species with larger flowers that was found to be easier to prepare in time for the variable (in timing) Easter celebrations. Madonna lily is popular as a gift on both Mother's Day (the second Sunday in May) and Memorial Day (30<sup>th</sup> May) in the United States.

The Japanese are said to eat the cooked bulb as a delicacy, particularly with white sauce and in some Eastern countries the bulbs are also used to make a kind of bread.

Cosmetically it has been used with honey as a face-pack.

Today the mucilage extracted from the bulbs is used commercially by the perfumery and cosmetics industries.

Medicinally, the bulb was used by herbalists for the treatment of fluid retention, boils, erysipelas, tonsillitis, female ailments, ulcers and burns. Today it is still taken internally for female disorders and fluid retention, and can be applied externally in a poultice on ulcers and inflammation.