

Ask a Master Gardener

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Q. Several weeks ago an Ask A Master Gardener column mentioned Fairy lilies. Can you tell me more about these flowers? C. Wetherington

A. Fairy lily is a common name for flowers in a group called *Zephyranthes* (ze-fi-RANTH-eez). Other common names include Rain lily and Zephyr lily. The Latin name is derived from the Greek god of the west wind, Zephyrus, and *anthos* meaning flower. *Zephyranthes* usually open after a significant spring or summer rain, thus the common name of Rain lily. These charming colony-forming perennials are native to the Southeastern United States, Central America, and South America. Rain lilies are 8-15 inches tall, with thick, shiny, grooved, grass-like leaves that form loose clumps. The flower is borne on a leafless stalk and has six distinct lobes that unite to form a funnel that points straight up. I've always imagined that if the flower was turned upside-down it would make a perfect hat for a little wood sprite.

Zephyranthes can be found in many colors including white, pink, and yellow. The Rain lily that is native to the Southeastern United States is *Zephyranthes atamasca* and has a white bloom. Many folks call this native the wild Easter Lily as it blooms near Eastertime. It can be spotted in the spring in wet woods, moist meadows, ditches, and sometimes limestone outcrops. A good place to view some of these beauties in the wild is at the McIntosh Reserve Park in Whitesburg in early spring. Other varieties bloom March through June, and sometimes a rogue bloom will appear in July or August depending on the amount of rain.

All Rain lilies prefer moist soil high in organic matter in shade to part-shade. A location that receives morning sun and then shade in the afternoon, such as near the trunk of a tree or near a bird bath, would be perfect. My Fairy lilies are planted near my bird bath and get the moisture they crave when the water is changed. *Zephyranthes* are winter hardy to USDA Zones 7-10 so they can be left in the ground to overwinter in our area. A light mulch of pine straw or pine nuggets will further protect the bulbs if there is a particularly cold and deep freeze. After blooming, the plant will begin to go dormant with the grass-like leaves disappearing only to re-appear in the winter.

Rain lilies can be found as bulbs which one should plant in the fall. They can also be found at some nurseries in quart containers with their grass-like foliage showing, ready to go into the ground. As time goes by, the bulbs will need to be divided occasionally, just as one would divide daffodils. After the foliage dies back, it can be hard to locate the bulbs if one wants to divide the colony. You might want to try this technique: Bury an unglazed clay pot to within

one inch of the top and fill with a rich organic soil. Be sure it is an unglazed pot, as the soil will need to drain so the bulbs do not rot from too much moisture. Plant your bulbs in this pot, mulch on top and around the pot, and you will always be able to find your bulbs even after the foliage is no longer visible.

The downloadable UGA Extension Bulletin 987-3, Native Plants for Georgia, Part III: Wildflowers, p. 101 and p. 146 has further information and pictures.

For other gardening questions, contact a Master Gardener Extension Volunteer at 770-836-8546, via e-mail at ccmg@uga.edu or visit our office in the Ag Center at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton.