

## Consider the lilies

November 2005

*Consider the lilies of the field; how they grow ... Mathew 6, 28.*

This is the time to consider the lilies of the grasslands, for in our district they have reached their peak. The lily family seems to grow best in the open grassy situations which we have in abundance round Hamilton. If they were absent the joy of walking the grasslands would be much diminished.

Technically all lilies have six “petals” with six long, stalked stamens arranged around a three-chambered seed-box in the centre of the flower.

The late winter flowering species, the **Yellow Stars** and, aptly named **Early Nancys**, have all but finished and have now been replaced by taller and more colourful relatives.

The well known and popular **Milkmaids** flower throughout springtime. Their white petalled flowers have six purple-tipped stamens ringing a dark seed box. The flowers are set at the top of the stem on long stalks that come out of the same point. This arrangement is known as an umbel.

Also in flower now are the **Chocolate Lilies**. These have lilac or purple flowers arranged along their branching stems. Although only a few flowers may be opened on any one plant they are often seen in massed groups of hundreds. When walking through such a patch the strong vanilla chocolate scent can make even a chocoholic’s head spin. There is a rare species in our district that has a more compact habit with more flowers along the stem. It tends to flower later.

One of the most attractive lilies is the **Blue Grass-lily**. On sunny days the bright blue flowers, with their delicate gold tipped anthers open all along the stems which rise from broad grass-like tufts of leaves.

Individual plants of **Bulbine Lily** may look a little scruffy but, when seen in masses, the splash of rich butter yellow colour is a spectacular sight. The carpet of colours of the River Red Gum woodland of Woohloer in spring is a sight to behold. Bulbine Lilies often grow amidst Milkmaids, Yellow Stars, Chocolate Lilies, Sun Orchids and many other groundcover species that add to the tapestry that is our grassland flora.

Many of the plants that we call lilies are not lilies at all. The Arum Lily is a good example, as are Water Lilies. The plant known as the Rock Lily is an orchid and Lilly Pillies are close relatives of the eucalypts.

On the other hand, there are some vegetables that we meet with every day in the kitchen, such as onions, garlic and asparagus, which are now considered to be members of the lily family. In some older reference books you may find them classified in other families.

In the long run it is not the names that matter. The important things are the plants and their continued survival.

Shakespeare said “...to gild the lily...is a wasteful and ridiculous excess”. Indeed, and to ignore the native lilies is to miss out on one of nature’s greatest charms.

Photos below (from left)

Yellow Stars (*Hypoxis glabella*).

Early Nancy (*Wurmbea dioica*)

Milkmaids (*Burchardia umbellata*)

Chocolate Lily (*Arthropodium strictum*)

Blue Grass-lily (*Caesia calliantha*)

Bulbine Lily (*Bulbine bulbosa*)

