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**Wildflower Spot - May 2017**  
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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## JAMESTOWN (ATAMASCO) LILY

*Zephyranthes atamasca*

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Jamestown lilies were among the first of many beautiful wildflowers to be noticed by the Jamestown colonists. A writer in 1629 reports: "The Indians in Virginia do call it *Attamusco*, some among us do call it *Lilionarcissus Virginianus*, because of the likeness of the flower to a Lilly (sic), and the leaves and root to a Daffodil." The Indian name refers to the location of the bulb under grass-like leaves. The genus name comes from the Greek, *zephyros*, meaning west wind, a reference to their origin in the Western Hemisphere from which they were first introduced to European gardeners in the 1800's.

Many species of *Zephyranthes* live in dry regions where they emerge from dormancy and quickly burst into bloom after infrequent heavy rainstorms. Hence, other common names are "rain lily", "fairy lily", and "zephyr lily". With a flower form like a trumpet, an alternative common name is "Easter lily", although it is not closely related to the Easter lily of florist shops. A



member of the Amaryllis Family, the Jamestown Lily is related to the familiar daffodils, amaryllis, and snowdrops.

The bulb may have been used medically by some southern Native American tribes for toothache but all parts of the plant are poisonous if eaten. Also called "stagger lily" because horses eating the leaves or bulbs succumb to a cerebrosplinal disease. Bacon's Rebellion was put down when the settlers served a tea made from the leaves to the English soldiers, who seemed to be intoxicated for several days.

The fragrant flowers are white with a yellowish center, and the stems may be as tall as of 12-18 inches. . They grow well in shade to part shade to full sun, preferring a low, damp location. Rafts of these lovely white lilies announce the arrival of spring in moist open woodlands, meadows and along country roads throughout the southeastern U.S. from Virginia to Mississippi and the northern half of Florida. Another of its habitats is on low ground adjacent to brackish marshes, such as at Jamestown Island.

Jamestown lily is hardy in zones 7-10. To propagate, divide the small bulblets from the mother bulb. The seeds can be planted as soon as they ripen, and will germinate quickly, but it will be 2-3 years before seedling plants produce their first flowers. Jamestown lilies look best in masses. They can be grown right in the lawn where they will rise and flower in early spring before you have to begin mowing the grass, or in a woodland garden. ❖

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**Photo:** Jamestown Lily (*Zephyranthes atamasca*) taken by Helen Hamilton  
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