



## A Tale of Two Lilies

by Carol Seminara, HCMG

The recent rains have painted the landscape with a verdant wash of fresh green. Hardy perennials are blooming again and, at least in my garden, some natives have germinated — my bluebonnet patch is crowded with baby plants that have already sent out their secondary leaves.

Do not, however, be fooled by this second, false spring. Fall is here. So says my calendar and other reliable indicators of the season: a hint of crispness in the early morning air, stores filled with the holiday decor hat trick of pumpkins, Pilgrims and poinsettias, and ubiquitous clusters of deep red blooms on bare green stalks dotting the landscape. Really, there's no prettier or more surprising harbinger of fall than the Oxblood Lily (*Rhodophiala bifida*). A member of the Amaryllis family, Oxblood Lilies are also called School House Lilies because their blooms begin appearing in mid- to late-September, about the time school starts.



*Cheerful clumps of vibrant red Oxblood Lilies mark the end of summer and start of fall. While not native, this perennial bulb is considered a Texas heirloom plant.*

Each emerging stem supports a cluster of three to six brilliant, trumpet-shaped blooms on stalks 10 to 16 inches tall. When the two-inch long blooms begin to fade, blade-like leaves appear and last until spring, providing a welcome spot of green color to the winter garden. Oxblood Lilies are just about perfect plants. They are hardy, drought tolerant, grow in full sun to partial shade, but tolerate full shade well, are not picky about soil type and actually prefer an alkaline environment. They naturalize well and are reliable bloomers.

Despite being seen across the Hill Country and throughout the state, Oxblood Lilies are not included in the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center's Native Plant Database because they are originally a native of South America, specifically Argentina and Uruguay. They are, however, classified as a Texas heirloom plant and were reportedly introduced to our region by German settlers.

Oxblood Lilies grow from dark blue-black bulbs about the size of a golf ball. Unlike their fair, dainty cousin the Rain Lily, Oxbloods do not produce viable seeds and must be propagated by division. Bulbs are occasionally available commercially, but they are not inexpensive. [Southern Bulb Company](#), a vendor that specializes in Texas-grown heirloom flower bulbs, offered two bulbs for \$9. Of course, with their propensity for naturalizing in almost any location, two bulbs left undivided would, in a couple of years, produce a nice stand of plants, reducing the cost-per-plant over time.

Probably the best and friendliest way to acquire Oxblood Lilies, if you aren't fortunate enough to have a stand of your own blooms, is as a pass-along plant. I've already approached a friend who's promised to give me some bulbs, which I intend to use under the large pecan tree in my front yard.

I can hardly wait, but wait I must. The time to move bulbs is after they have gone dormant, i.e., in early summer, although new bulbs can be successfully planted in early fall. Plant bulbs at least 3 inches deep. Julie Ryan in her book *Perennial Gardens for Texas* (University of Texas Press, ISBN 978-0-292-77089-8) recommends planting Oxblood Lily bulbs at a depth of 6 inches. Generally speaking, the rule-of-thumb for planting bulbs says they should be placed at a depth of three times the height of the bulb..

I have occasionally seen Oxblood Lilies referenced as Hurricane Lilies, probably because it is the rain from early fall hurricanes that stimulates their blooming. That name, however, is usually applied to the Red Spider Lily (*Lycoris radiat*) that produces flowers in October at the height of hurricane season. More common throughout the southeastern United States, Red Spider Lilies likewise do well here in Central Texas.

Red Spider Lilies, also known as Surprise Lilies, are generally taller — 18 to 24 inches — and showier, sporting clusters of five to seven flowers with extremely long anthers (that part of the flower's stamen that contains the pollen). Like Oxblood Lilies, the blooms appear seemingly overnight on long bare stems and, when the flowers wither, long, narrow leaves appear and last through the winter and well into summer. Native to Japan and China, the Red Spider Lily was supposedly brought back to North Carolina by a Naval officer aboard one of Commodore Perry's steamships that opened the ports to Japan in 1854. Those original three bulbs thrived and eventually spread, becoming naturalized across the southern U.S.

Red Spider Lilies share the Oxblood Lilies easy-going nature when it comes to being virtually effortless to cultivate. Both share a tolerance for drought conditions, flourish in partial shade to full sun, and accept a wide-range of less than ideal soils. Either of these lilies would make a spectacular addition to a garden. In fact, they are the September "plant of the month" according to Texas A&M Landscape Horticulturist Dr. William C. Welch. You can read his article on the subject at [Horticultural Update](#).