

Wildflowers by Jill McNealy

Atamasco or Jamestown lily, the Virginia Native Plant Society wildflower selection for 2007, was probably one of the most beautiful wildflowers seen at our first colony, Jamestown. It really is stunning. Not that this was the most valuable plant for the early settlers who were trying to scrape out a living from the tidewater area of southeastern Virginia. A thriving vegetable garden would have been far more valuable to the early settlers who were trying to settle this undeveloped country.

From base to tip these lilies are approximately three inches long. They are relatively small and inconspicuous in the grass with glossy, flat leaves, so that when they are not in flower they are easy to overlook. They really do look like a miniature Easter lily. The genus name is derived from two Greek words, zephros, meaning west wind and anthos, meaning flower. The species name Atamasco is attributed to Tapehanek words meaning under grass. The genus Zephyranthes contains about 50 species worldwide and is part of the amaryllis family. In the United States about 16 are found in the southeast so if one is going to study these plants that is where you will have to go.

Botanists have made a lot of assumptions about the pollination of the Jamestown lily. One theory is that hawk moths are responsible, but no definitive documentation exists. The floral tube where the nectar is produced is available to the hawk moths but not to other floral visitors. The white flowers would be the lure. A clear photograph of a hawk moth's visit would answer this question.

These plants make a handsome addition to any wildflower garden. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a thriving patch of atamasco lilies growing at the arboretum. We are actually too far north to have a successful planting season. In Virginia it is most common in the southeastern coastal plain in low woods and wet meadows and can even be found along road shoulders. Atamasco lilies can be sprouted from seed or by division early in the summer when leaf mold has been added to it. Do you think that these lilies could make it here? Is it worth a try?

Happy Gardening.
Jill McNealy