

LEMON LILY FESTIVAL OF IDYLLWILD: HOW A LOCAL LILY BECAME A CAUSE TO CELEBRATE

by Kathryn A. Kramer

The lemon lily (*Lilium parryi*) of the Southern California Mountains may be the only native geophyte with its own festival. This is the tale of how an entire town came together to celebrate and conserve this species.

THE LILY

Lilium parryi is one of 11 species of *Liliums* native to California. It occurs in scattered populations in the transverse and peninsular ranges

The lemon lily (*Lilium parryi*) found in the southern California mountains and the Sky Islands of southern Arizona. One population has been reported from Mexico. Photograph by Jordan Zylstra and courtesy of the US Forest Service.



of southern California and in the sky island mountains of southeastern Arizona and Sonora, Mexico. Although neither federally or State-Listed, *L. parryi* is rare enough to warrant 1B.2 status by CNPS and is a Forest Service Sensitive Species. This perennial herb grows from a bulb-like scaly rhizome along mountain streams and meadows above 4,000 feet; it is restricted to riparian habitats. A single plant may grow to 4-6 feet with multiple, large, fragrant yellow, flowers. Local botanists found one plant

with 40 buds and flowers in a single year! This stunning plant is an excellent excuse for a hike to cooler mountain meadows in early July.

Unfortunately, most lemon lilies are now *only* found in high elevations above 7,000 feet; there are few to enjoy in easily accessible areas. There are many reasons that lemon lilies have disappeared from the most visible public creeks and streams: the striking flowers are tempting to pick and tuck on the outside of a daypack, lemon lilies are eaten by local herbivores: deer crop off flower buds and gophers consume the rhizomes, and lower snowpack in recent years has resulted in less prime habitat. However, the most horrifying rea-

son may have to do with bulb fanciers at the turn of the last century: in 1902, Harvey Monroe Hall noted the activity of bulb collectors in the San Jacintos: "... one party took out over 5000 [lemon lily] bulbs in a single season" (p. 68, Hall, 1902). While lemon lily habitat quality has declined, this may be the case of a plant becoming rare due to being over-loved. . . .

CONCERN IN THE COMMUNITY

Our story takes place in Idyllwild, a small community in the San Jacinto Mountains above Palm Springs. Local botanists Dave Stith and Tom Chester have studied the local flora as an avocation for several years. Dave, in particular, is a longtime admirer of lemon lilies. After finding the quote in Hall's monograph on the flora of the San Jacinto Mountains several of us wondered if something couldn't be done: public awareness was key. Holding a festival devoted to the lemon lily was one way of getting the word out to a large number of people. Idyllwild has a history of festivals; one celebrating such a beautiful plant would help ensure that both locals and visitors are aware and care about the fate of this stunning plant.

The mountain environment of Idyllwild is a getaway place for people of San Diego, Los Angeles and the desert cities to escape the summer heat. It is a tourist town with repeat visitors, some whose families have been coming to Idyllwild for generations. It also attracts artists, musicians, and hikers and is a stop for Pacific Crest Trail through-hikers. In short, Idyllwild attracts enough interested people for



ABOVE: Spectacular *Lilium parryi* in its native habitat. The flowers are large, 4–6" in diameter.
 • RIGHT: Lemon lily close-up. Photographs by Jordan Zylstra and courtesy of the US Forest Service.

a festival celebrating a beautiful plant to be successful.

STARTING THE FIRST FESTIVAL—JULY 2010

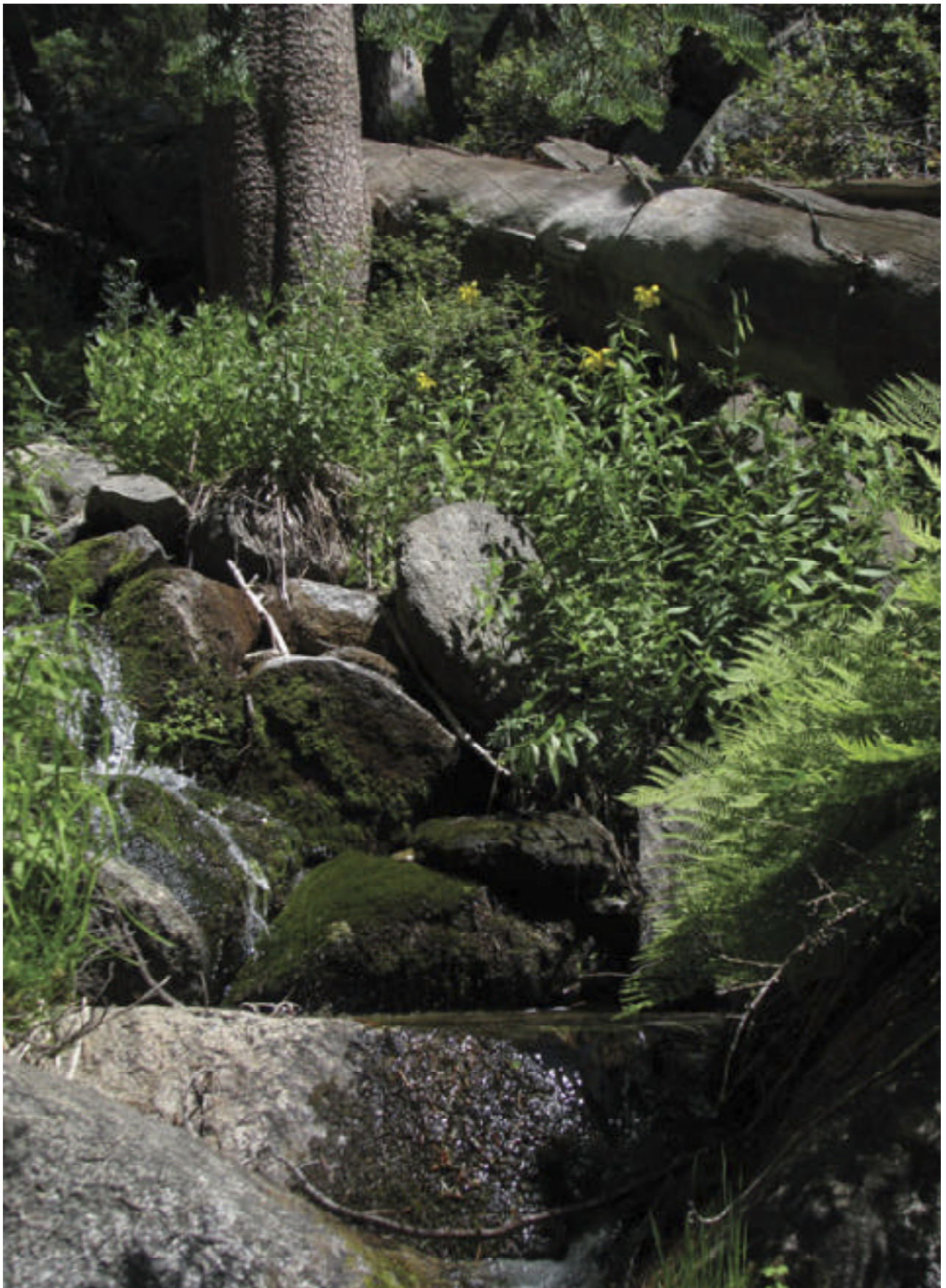
Dave Stith started working on the Lemon Lily Festival in 2009 by garnering support from the local merchants, Riverside County's Idyllwild Nature Center and various interested groups and individuals. His efforts and commitment to include the town have paid off in spades. He has said that whenever he mentioned Hall's report of 5,000 lily bulbs being dug up in a single year to the various groups, there would be "an audible gasp in the room"; it was easy to

convince people that this was a good cause. Several committees were formed and met for months before the first festival in 2010 at the Nature Center. The Nature Center Director at the time, Shelly Kibbey, was extremely supportive of the Festival. The Festival committee became part of the non-profit Friends of the Idyllwild Nature Center, an organization that facilitated much of the preparation. Another talented leader from the business community, Doug Yagaloff, stepped up and the merchants were very active in the first year's festival. Doug also contacted the local county supervisor and a group of lemon lily supporters convinced the county su-



pervisors to proclaim July as Lemon Lily Month in Riverside County.

"Education, celebration, and restoration of the lemon lily" was Dave's festival mantra. This was a very relevant theme as few people at that time had actually seen a lemon lily. With photographs of lemon



lilies and a few purchased bulbs, community creativity was set loose! Over the years of the Festival, various lemon lily-themed activities have occurred: gift baskets of donated items were offered in a raffle in which money had to be spent in local stores to obtain the raffle tickets in the first year. Many merchants offered lemon lily-themed products during the Festival weekend. The local **quilt-**ing guild designed and donated an original lemon lily quilt to be raffled off with the proceeds benefiting the Lemon Lily Festival restoration work; later, original artwork includ-



ing a stained-glass piece and a ceramic lemon lily platter were raffled off. A lemon lily banner competition was held and the banners were also auctioned off. Prior to

the Festival, the banners were displayed in town to encourage people to come to the event. Festival organizers have offered t-shirts and pins for visitors.

The theme for the festival was celebrating the time in Idyllwild when lemon lilies would have been abundant, before the turn of the last century. Music and activities were organized with this in mind. A lemon lily song was written and performed by a group of local singers and people dressed in turn-of-the-last-century inspired clothing. Education talks were offered several times each day

ABOVE: Each year an original piece of art is made especially for the Festival. In the early years, the local quilt guild donated a handmade quilt for this purpose. Photograph by Avianna Jones; courtesy of the Idyllwild Town Crier. • FACING PAGE: *Lilium parryi* in the San Jacinto **Wilderness** in typical habitat. Photograph by Jordan Zylstra; courtesy of the US Forest Service.



TOP: Information table at the first Lemon Lily Festival in Idyllwild. Photograph courtesy of the Idyllwild Town Crier. • BOTTOM: For several years, the Lemon Lily Festival held a banner competition for the local artists. The banners were displayed in downtown Idyllwild before the Festival and auctioned off afterwards. Photograph by Barbara Rees and courtesy of the Idyllwild Town Crier.

and naturalists led hikes to observe lemon lilies in nature. Fortunately, there were a few, accessible lilies left in Lily Creek on Idyllwild Nature Center land for Festival visitors to see. We talked about what had happened to the lemon lily and how its numbers could be increased through both preservation and restoration at every opportunity.

Los Angeles public television station KCET even did an entire epi-

sode of California's Gold devoted to the first festival—which the station graciously continues to replay each year before festival time.

RESTORATION EFFORTS— INCREASING THE LEMON LILY

Having actual lemon lilies in bloom in nature for people to see was important for Festival credibil-



TOP: Education talks are given each year at the festival about lemon lily natural history, restoration efforts and the fate of lilies after the Mountain Fire in 2013. Photograph by J.P. Crumrine and courtesy of the Idyllwild Town Crier. • BOTTOM: Lemon lily with bulb scales. This plant is 3 years old. Photograph by Kathryn Kramer.

ity. In addition to the few plants growing naturally at the Nature Center, bulbs were also purchased from

a nursery in Oregon whose original stock had come from this area in the 1970s. The first bulbs were planted

in hopes that they would be in bloom in time for the Festival; it is always difficult to plan an event based on flowering in nature in advance! Over the years, this has supplied many “teachable moments” at the Festival on how springtime temperatures affect the bloom time of most plants. Bulbs have been planted in appropriate habitat around the community on private property and at the Nature Center—in Lily Creek—to augment the population.

We continue to perfect propagation techniques for increasing lemon lilies. We’ve tried tissue culture techniques but have found that local seed is relatively easy to germinate after being stratified for a few months in a refrigerator. We are learning how to “overwinter” the seedlings in order to grow bulbs large enough to survive once planted. The goal is to re-establish colonies in the Idyllwild area in lily habitat.

As of this writing, the Lemon Lily Festival continues on. The Idyllwild Nature Center has taken the lead and held the Festival for the last few years. Festival status can be found at lemonlilyfestival.com.

The Festival has changed the public’s attitude towards lemon lilies—from being unaware of this gorgeous native plant to becoming fiercely protective of it! Lemon lilies are celebrated every July in Riverside County and there is now a continuing community effort among botanists and gardeners to “bring them back” to local habitats.

REFERENCES

- Hall, H.M. 1902. A botanical survey of San Jacinto Mountain. *University of California Publications Botany* 1:1–140.
- McRae, E.A. 2001. *Lilies: A Guide for Growers and Collectors*. Timber Press, Portland, OR.

Kathryn A. Kramer, Ph. D, 40250 Reseda Springs Rd., Hemet, CA 92544-9021; Kakramer1@icloud.com