

FLORAL FANCIES

By C. T. Ward, Frederick County Master Gardener, February, 2023

Beautiful to look at with coveted aromas and varieties to suit anyone's aesthetic taste, flowers have been an inseparable part of our lives throughout history. Whether they were used for decorations, perfumes, or even as food, flowers and other flora have taken on roles far from their original evolutionary purposes.

One of the societal roles of flowers at least since medieval times is floriography. Literally meaning "language of flowers," floriography has been used in Biblical texts and in ancient and traditional cultures worldwide. However, it was in the Victorian era that this art style and form of communication took off. Since outward expressions of affection and emotion were essentially frowned upon, people could not develop or even break off relationships easily. Taking hints from the popular study of ancient and medieval history, people in the Victorian era began to communicate their true feelings by arranging flower bouquets to "spell out" a message to the recipient based on the historical symbolism of each flower and plant. This method of communication carried over to artwork, architecture, literature, and even tombstone engravings, allowing Victorians all equipped with floral dictionaries and pamphlets to truly express their thoughts and feelings with one another while keeping up appearances for social elite dedicated to strict etiquette.

Though the meanings and significance of flowers and plants differ, depending on the region and time period of their use, universal definitions of common blooms and plants can still be seen today in our modern culture. For example, the yellow rose, which symbolized friendship in Victorian era England, meant death and unrequited love in the state of Texas during the same time period. Now the yellow rose represents mutual friendship in both regions. With all of these various meanings, floral dictionaries became incredibly popular everyday items in the typical Victorian era household. The first known Victorian era floral dictionary was printed in 1819 in France by Louise Cortambert (who wrote under the pseudonym of Madame Charlotte de la Tour), entitled *Le Langage des Fleurs*, and remained a core resource and guide for over four decades. British flower writer and publisher Robert Tyas is credited with reprinting Cortambert's book into English in his 1836 edition, *The Sentiment of Flowers; or, Language of Flora*. More contemporary versions were written between 1820 and 1880 when the trend became popular in Great Britain and the United States, imparting their insight in popular fiction written by the British authors Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte, and the American poet Emily Dickinson. All three authors were avid gardeners and quick to utilize floral imagery in their work to convey deep meanings behind life events, relationships, and in the case of novelists Austen and Bronte, as omens on future outcomes for the characters.

Some examples of floriography and the symbolism of flowers taken from the *Illustrated Language of Flowers* (1856), compiled and edited by Mrs. L. Burke, are as follows: Butterfly weed—a plea for personal freedom to live as one desires; red carnations—sorrow; daisy—innocence and attachment; white rose—worthy of someone's love; sweet violets—modesty; red roses—symbolizing not only affection through bloodshed and sacrifice, today it mainly expresses romantic love; white lilies—virginity and purity; the red poppy—consolation (used especially in World War I in remembrance of fallen military officers and emergency responders).

Using these symbolic definitions, Victorians created whole conversations and statements through the arrangement of multiple types of flowers and plants together in bouquets or in smaller bouquets known as “nosegays” or “tussie-mussies” that were comprised of herbs with a single flower in the center which ladies could pin on their dresses and topcoats to reveal another level of communication to possible suitors. For example, combining the red rose and white rose conveys the message of unity and the reward of virtuous morals and dedication to one another. A bouquet with Dame’s Rocket (Rivalry), ranunculus (Charm), and rhododendrons (Dedication) sent by a lady to a suitor would say to the suitor, “You have a rival in my hand in marriage, but I am dazzled by your charm and I won’t even consider him again.”

If the “tussie-mussie” was pinned to the lady’s breast, it was bad news for the sender, for it meant she only considered him a friend, but pinning the “tussie-mussie” over her heart was an all-out declaration of love to the sender. This type of behavior became an acceptable method of flirting between a lady and her suitors while still distancing themselves from the unrestrained and uncivilized chatter of flirting and expressing personal opinion and emotions during a time in which marriage and relationships were contracted as more of a political chore by aristocrats and royalty.

Though the Victorian era officially ended by the 1920s, many of the commonplace meanings and practices around flowers and plants are still active today, a mere 100 years later. In keeping with these past trends, modern society still holds on to many old tales and legends about plants and the meaning of them. For example:

- It is bad luck to give someone a potted plant during a hospital stay, for it predicts a long, difficult recovery.
- It is common, especially in the American South, to eat money-symbolizing foods like cabbage, black-eyed peas, or collard greens on New Year’s Eve at the stroke of midnight or as the first meal of the New Year to bring in wealth and financial stability.
- Gifting someone a snake plant, especially as a house-warming gift, invites death into the home.
- Money plants, which promote welfare and riches, are common gifts to people who begin a new job or career or even retire.
- Planting peppers when you are mad will make the pepper “fruit” hotter.
- A common Appalachian belief—saying “thank you” when someone gives you a plant—is bad luck and will kill the plant. The best response is to compliment the plant on its beauty or uniqueness.

So as you prepare the perfect bouquet to express your feelings toward your beloved this Valentine’s holiday, take some time to study some of these unique flower meanings to create a personalized bouquet not only for your personal fancy, but as a way to better express your thoughts and feelings towards your loved one. Or, you can take a note from the Victorian era and give him/her a pineapple to communicate how absolutely perfect that person is in each and every way. But whatever you choose to do, it won’t be a Valentine’s Day either of you will forget anytime soon.

You can find more gardening information and advice online at:

- University of MD Extension Home & Garden Information Center, <https://extension.umd.edu/programs/environmentnatural-resources/program-areas/home-and-garden-information-center>;
- Frederick County Master Gardeners Publications, <http://extension.umd.edu/locations/frederick-county/home-gardening>;
- Facebook, <http://www.facebook.com/mastergardenersfrederickcountymaryland>;
- or call us at [301-600-1596](tel:301-600-1596).



Three nosegays or “**tussie-mussies**.” Tussie-mussies made of flowers and herbs date from medieval times and were thought to ward off disease or were simply used to provide a pleasant smell. During Victorian times they were used to send non-verbal messages to loved ones. (Source: New Orleans Auction Galleries.)



Hollyhock (*Alcea rosea*), hepatica (*Hepatica nobilis*) and Restharrow (*Ononis spinosis*), from *The Language of Flowers; or, Floral Emblems of Thoughts, Feelings, and Sentiments* (1896) by Robert Tyas. (Source: [Biodiversity Heritage Library <biodiversitylibrary.org>](http://biodiversitylibrary.org))

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