

The Herbs and Flowers of the Virgin Mary

Information for this presentation was gathered from *The Herbarist*, 1982

Marian Gardens, gardens planted with herbs and flowers that through the ages have been associated with the Virgin Mary, can be said to have roots that go back to times before Christ. Even then, herbs, especially their blossoms, served as symbols of everything that was pure and holy, as found in Christ and his Virgin Mother.

Legends regarding many of these flowers abound in Christian folklore. For instance, it is related that the *Ornithogalum arabicum*, Star-of-Bethlehem, first appeared on this earth on the night of Christ's birth. According to the legend, the star that led the three wise men to Bethlehem burst into thousands of fragments after it had stopped at its destination. These bright fragments which fell to the ground were transformed into flowers, indicating to the Magi the holiness of the area they were in.

Another legend relates that the *Helleborus niger*, the Christmas rose, miraculously appeared when an angel's wings swept the ground in order to provide a gift for a poor girl who was weeping because she had no gift to place beside those brought by the shepherds to the manger at Bethlehem.

In the "nature symbolism" of the Church, certain plants, such as wheat, grapes, thorny plants, and cross-shaped flowers, which recalled the Last Supper, the Crowning of Thorns, the Crucifixion, and the Mystical Body, referred directly to Christ. However, herbs and flowers were generally referred to Christ through his Mother, and thus Mary, typified as the Mystical Bride of Christ by the Church Fathers, was given the titles of Mystical Rose, Rose of Sharon, Lily-of-the-Valley, and Garden Enclosed.

Medieval Christians, in their search for the most exact likeness of Mary, realized that in all of God's creations no flower could excel in representing the beauty of her holiness, the splendor of her heavenly glory and the immaculateness of her pure heart.

It was believed by these early medieval Christians that:

1. Fragrant herbs and flowers were unsurpassed in recalling Mary's spiritual sweetness
2. Soothing and healing herbs to represent her heavenly Mercy and Assistance
2. Bitter and sour herbs to represent her bitter sorrows

The Venerable Bede (673-735), Benedictine monk, historian, and scholar, wrote of the white lily as the emblem of the Blessed Virgin; the white petals symbolized the purity of her body and the golden anthers the beauty of her soul. Anthers are the part of the flower that contains the pollen. Later, St. Bernard praised the Virgin Mary as "the violet of humility, the lily of chastity, the rose of charity, the Balm of Gilead, and the golden gillyflower of heaven." Now there are several Gillyflowers and they were considered very romantic. There were several of these fragrant flowers but the carnation was first in line and this flower was actually most used in Chaucer and Shakespeare plays.

With time, more and more herbs and flowers, associated with Mary in various ways, took on emblematic significance and were adopted as signifying specific virtues. Among these, some of the most important were the rose (*Rosa canina*), which was adopted as the emblem of Mary's love of God; the white lily (*Lilium candidum*, Madonna lily), symbolizing her purity; the myrtle (*Myrtus communis*), symbolizing her virginity; and the marigold (*Calendula officinalis*), symbolizing her heavenly glory. Now the myrtle was an evergreen shrub which has glossy aromatic foliage and white flowers.

Christians, who saw these herbs and flowers as special signs of heaven and the unfolding of the spiritual life, gathered them for the Church, and eventually started placing them on the altars. For special occasions they were strewn throughout the Church and woven into garlands and crowns which were actually worn by the priests.

As their importance intensified, these symbolic flowers and herbs were collected and tended in what was called the sacristan's gardens, gardens that were planted near the Church for purposes of providing cut flowers and herbs for the altar and for Church processions assuring a steady supply.

Later, little specialty gardens devoted solely to the cultivation of the symbolic plants associated with Mary, frequently planted around statuary figures of the Virgin Mary or Virgin with Child, were created. These specialty gardens, called St. Mary's Gardens, or Mary Gardens, enabled people to honor the Virgin Mary and her Son directly in the garden, as well as through the use of the cut flowers inside the Church. These both became a most beautiful gift to Mary and the Church.

It is not known exactly where or when a Mary Garden was first planted. However, it is known that St. Fiacre (600-670), Patron Saint of Gardeners, devoted his life to tending a garden surrounding an oratory and hospice which he built and dedicated to Mary. It was perhaps his garden which served as a model and inspiration for such future gardens.

Without question, many such gardens existed in medieval times, but because all evidence of a garden is lost in a comparatively short time once it is not tended, there is know no means of supportive evidence of these beautiful gardens. Unfortunately, few wrote books on gardening and/or gardens during that time and those that were written and/or illustrated relied mostly on past classical works, which resulted in these manuscripts and books not correctly reflecting the actual plants or garden themselves.

The Mary Gardens depicted in religious art of that period appear to be ideally conceived rather than based on actual gardens. The St. Mary's Garden mentioned in the accounting records of Norwich Priory in England, is now believed, after thorough research, to have been a traditional monastic rose garden. Additionally the reputed Mary Garden of Melrose Abbey in Scotland now appears to never have actually existed. It is of course possible that these private gardens were Mary Gardens, but there is no specific proof of this.

Literature pertaining to the period of the discovery of the New World, shows that the early explorers and settlers not only very early on brought plants that were symbolically related to the Virgin Mary, but that they also very quickly associated native wild plants with symbolic names. Examples are: two terrestrial orchids, Lady's Slipper (*Cypripedium spp.*) and Lady's Tresses (*Spiranthes spp.*); Madonna's Pins (*Geranium maculatum*, wild geranium); Lady's Smock (*Cardamine pratensis*, meadow cress); Our Lady's Mantle (*Ipomoea spp.*, morning glory); and Our Lady's Locketts (*Polygonatum spp.*, Solomon's seed).

Although flower symbolism in the New World has existed from the days of its discovery and colonization, there is, ironically, no real evidence of a Mary Garden anywhere in the Americas until quite recent times.

It is interesting that in 1932, while seven Boston ladies were busy studying botany at Harvard and thinking of founding a society to further the knowledge of herbs, another lady in nearby Woods Hole, Cape Cod, was busy researching a special category of herbs and plants, specifically those with old religious names that symbolized the Virgin Mary. She planted a selection of these symbolic flowers in a very special garden and dedicated the garden to the Virgin Mary. Therefore, it is believed, that this garden was the first public Mary Garden in America.

Here is picture of Cape Cod, Woods Hole Mary garden of 1932.



Now, floriography is the study of the meaning of flowers. The Victorian era has had this down to a science. I believe I should have been born in the Victorian era as I have always will love anything Victorian. In the Victorian era, flowers, flowers and more flowers. No table complete without flowers.

Today, if we want to supplement our text and social media with a more visual element, we search for the right emoji; but in the 19th century, Victorians would've used **flowers**. In fact, due to the severe restrictions of Victorian society, an entire language in flowers was developed so that senders could express feelings and emotions through these colorful coded messages. Consequently, Victorians carried floral dictionaries to decipher received bouquets and to compose their replies. I find this amazing and wonderful!

Armed with the right knowledge, you too can send secret messages through beautiful bouquets or plant the “right ones” in your Mary Garden.

In art history, **anemones** were favorite flowers of Impressionist painters, like Monet. To Victorians, anemones carried dark undertones and meant *forsaken*.

The name **aster** comes from the Ancient Greek word for “star,” and this flower is recognized for its unique star-shaped head. To Victorians, the aster flower represented *daintiness*.

As a 19th-century favorite, each color of **camellia** had a purpose.

Red camellias meant *you're a flame in my heart*.

White camellias meant *you're adorable*.

Pink camellias meant *longing for you*.

The scientific name of the **carnation** is dianthus, which derives from the Greek words “dios” (genitive of “Zeus”) and “anthos” (meaning “flower”). They are therefore referred to as the “flower of Zeus.” Each color of carnation carried different meanings to Victorians:

Red carnations symbolized *admiration*.

White carnations symbolized *purity*.

Purple carnations symbolized *capriciousness*.

Pink carnations symbolized *gratitude*.

Yellow carnations symbolized *rejection*.

In Victorian culture, **chrysanthemums** meant *you're a wonderful friend*.

The Latin name for **daffodil** is narcissus, based on the tragic myth of the beautiful Greek hero who fell in love with his reflection. But in Victorian times, this flower meant *chivalry* and *unrequited love*.

One of the cheeriest flowers in the field, the **daisy** very fittingly meant *innocence and hope*.

To Victorians, **gardenias** were as romantic as they looked and meant *secret love*.

Like its Greek meaning of “rainbow,” the **iris** carried different meanings to Victorians depending on the color and quantity. A bouquet of blue irises symbolized *hope and faith*, while a purple iris meant *wisdom*.

Victorian widows were often seen wearing **lilacs**, as they were meant to be *reminders of an old love*.

Although Victorians were passionate flower collectors, during the 19th century, **orchids** were extremely hard to find in England, thus implying that orchid owners were of remarkable wealth and good taste. Giving an orchid expressed *deep love and passion*.

Originally deriving from the French word “pensée,” the **pansy** flower symbolized *thoughtfulness*.

In China, **peonies** are considered to be the “king of flowers.” The Victorians used peonies to express *prosperity and happy marriage*.

Today, red **roses** are the go-to for Valentine's Day lovers. According to the Victorian language of flowers, each color of rose had a different meaning:

Red roses meant *I love you*.

White roses meant *charm or innocence*.

Pink roses meant *perfect happiness*.

Yellow roses meant *jealousy*.

One of the most peculiar species of flower, the **snapdragon**, has a complicated place in Victorian culture. It was regarded as a symbol for both *deception* and *graciousness*, but if a snapdragon was sent to someone with a **hyacinth** (known for *truth*), then it meant that the giver was *sorry for their mistakes*.

Vincent van Gogh famously painted twelve canvases of **sunflowers**, seven of which he used to decorate his home in Arles. Although Van Gogh was drawn to their bright colors, in Victorian culture, a tall sunflower meant *false riches*, and a small one expressed *adoration*.

Looking at the happy **tulip**, one can't help but think of the Netherlands and their famous "tulip mania," during which the bulbs became so popular they were used as currency. Victorians had a very different interpretation of the flower, as to them it symbolized *charity*.

Verbena is a flower with many religious connotations, having the nicknames of Holy Herb, Herb of the Cross, and Devil's Bane. The Victorian meaning of verbena was of a similar vein: *pray for me*.

The delicate **violet** meant *faithfulness and modesty*.

Typically recognized as the sidekick in a larger bouquet, **yarrow** flowers were a symbol for *healing*.

One of the brightest blooms in the garden, **zinnia** flowers are easy to grow and long-lasting. Likewise, Victorians believed zinnias symbolized *thoughts of an absent friend*.

Loving the Victorian era and flowers as I do, I currently have in my cart one of the wonderful floriography books. One day I'll actually purchase this coffee table amazing book.

A small Mary Garden, as part of any garden, herb or otherwise, would certainly enrich not only the garden and gardener, but visitors to the garden as well. All herbs and flowers evoke a certain fascination in all who pass by, but herbs and flowers which have special symbolic associations with the Virgin Mary add that extra touch of wonder that reminds us all of the Creator, and which can make the garden truly "a garden of paradise".

I will send this presentation to Kathleen who will undoubtedly place it on the website.

Hail Mary.....

Mary, most beautiful of all flowers, pray for us.

Amen