

Hidden Treasure-Historical Truth
Flowers, the Language of Love
By Katherine Bone

To-morrow is Saint Valentine's Day.
All in the morning betime,
And I a maid at your window,
To be your Valentine.

Ophelia: IV, v:49, Hamlet Prince of Denmark, W. Shakespeare (1564-1616)

Valentine's Day is a day set aside to honor love. How we show affection to others on Valentine's Day reveals a lot about ourselves. In the past, poets raised the bar by writing passionate sonnets of courtly love. Many of these famous poems by Keats, Byron, and Shakespeare, have been immortalized and whispered throughout the ages, romantically branding hearts. Today, old traditions and poetic sentiments have been transferred to gifts of Valentine's Day cards, chocolate candy, and flowers. Of the three, however, the most endearing symbol of love can be found in the hidden meanings of flowers. Flowers silently declare, "Be mine!" as in the plea of a dozen red roses. "I can't live without you!" a devoted primrose insists. "Please forgive me," implores the purple hyacinth.

"There's rosemary, that's for remembrance. Pray you, love, remember. And there is pansies, that's for thoughts." Ophelia: IV, v 173

"There's fennel for you, and columbines. There's rue for you, and here's some for me. We may call it herb of grace o' Sundays. O, you must wear your rue with a difference. There's a daisy. I would give you some violets..."

Ophelia: IV, v:179-182, Hamlet Prince of Denmark, W. Shakespeare (1564-1616)

In 1718, Lady Mary Wortley Montague wrote the *Secret Language of Flowers*. Louise Cortambert, writing under the pen name Madame Charlotte de la Tour, wrote *Le Language des Fleurs*, in 1819. The book was widely popular and a Victorian equivalent was written by Miss Corruthers of Inverness in 1879. *The Language of Flowers*, by Jean Marsh was published in 1884. Entirely dedicated to flowers, it set the standard for all floral knowledge to come.

During Queen Victoria's time, women invented ways to communicate with those society had forbidden them to address. Creating secret missives, women used pictures of flowers to convey hidden meanings rather than simply writing a message on a card or stationary that could be easily interpreted. Clever attention was also given to the specific day a message was received. Many Victorians didn't approve of sending these 'notes'. But one woman, Esther Howland, after graduating from Mount Holyoke College in 1847, proved otherwise selling valentines worth \$5,000, in 1848. Emily Dickinson, also a graduate of Mount Holyoke College, noted Esther's struggle to sell her 'love notes' in a letter she wrote to her brother, February 14, 1848. "Monday afternoon Mistress Lyon arose in the hall and forbade our sending any of those foolish notes called valentines." Esther's valentines eventually netted more than \$100,000 in annual sales.

Victorians used *floriography* to convey language through a limited selection of flowers, acknowledging various numbers thereof, and their specific genus types. Secrets included how flowers were worn. For instance, a flower worn upright granted a positive reply. A flower worn upside down achieved the opposite effect. A ribbon not only added beauty to an arrangement, bouquet, tussie-mussie, or corsage, but it, too, had purpose. Tied to the left, a colorful ribbon gave a nod to the giver. Tied to the right, a ribbon paid homage to the recipient. And not to be outdone, flowers also answered the deepest longing within a suitor's heart by relating the answer, *yes* when given with the right hand, or *no* when offered with the left hand.

How flowers were used betrayed a giver's true intentions or delivered a promise of everlasting love. A Victorian bouquet arrived only after thorough planning and introspection. Modern habits of packaging multiples of the same flower appear primitive in contrast to Victorians who believed assembling a variety of flowers, taking time to organize shapes and sizes, textures and colors, made honoring loved ones a cherished art.

Here's a breakdown of Victorian Flowers and their meanings:

- *Apple Blossom- preference, promise
- *Azalea- temperance, abundance, romance
- *Basil- hatred, best wishes
- *Columbine- folly, desertion
- *Daisy- innocence, newborn, "I share your sentiment"
- *Daffodil- regard, emblem of regard, chivalry
- *Holly- foresight, domestic happiness
- *Iris- message, inspiration
- *Ivy- fidelity, friendship, marriage
- *Lavender- distrust, luck, devotion
- *Lily- purity, modesty
- *Marigold- sorrow, jealousy, health, grief or despair, desire for riches
- *Morning Glory- affection, transience of life
- *Myrtle- love, marriage, fidelity
- *Oak- hospitality, liberty
- *Pansy (Heart's ear) - thoughtfulness, thoughtful recollection, think of me
- *Primrose- consistency, early youth, I can't live without you
- *Rhododendron- danger, beware
- *Rose (single) simplicity, beauty
 - Red: love, passionate love, beauty, I love you
 - Yellow: zealous, friendship, joy, freedom
 - Pink: grace, beauty, happiness, gratitude, appreciation, admiration
 - Black: you are my obsession
 - Orange: you are my secret love
 - Hibiscus: delicate beauty
 - Thornless: love at first sight
 - Bouquet of mature blooms: gratitude
 - Tea: I'll remember always
 - Bridal: happy love
- *Thistle- defiance

- *Tulip- fame, declaration of love, my perfect lover, reclamation of love
 - Red: my perfect lover, reclamation of love
 - Purple: royalty
 - Pink: caring
 - White: forgiveness
 - Yellow: hopelessly in love
- *Violet- faithfulness, loyalty, modesty, humility
- *Water-Lily- pure of heart
- *Zinnia- thoughts of absent friends

Famous editor of Godey's Lady's Book, Sarah Josepha Hale, wrote *Flora's Interpreter*, in 1833.

Here is her language of flowers list.

- *Damask red rose- bashful love
- *Amaryllis- beautiful but timid
- *Dandelion- coquetry
- *Variegated tulip- beautiful eyes
- *Narcissus- egotism, self love
- *French marigold- jealousy
- *White rose- "I am in despair"
- *Larkspur- fickleness
- *Scarlet poppy- fantastic extravagance

"Yet, no- not words, for they
 But half can tell love's feeling;
 Sweet flowers alone can say
 What passion fears revealing
 A once bright rose's wither'd leaf,
 A tow'ring lily broken-
 Oh, these may pain a grief
 No words could e-er have spoken."

Thomas Hood (1799-1885), friend of John Keats.

Ask for flowers this Valentine's Day. They are guaranteed to brighten a dreary February day and a love-sick heart. When your bouquet arrives, cherish it. Look deeply into each flower, discover its hidden secrets. Revel in the knowledge that you are loved.