

Valentine's Flowers and Celebrations

by Candace Mullen, Bell County Master Gardener

Every February 14th, all across the country and world, candy, flowers and small gifts are exchanged between loved ones, all in the name of St. Valentine. I have often wondered if anyone realized how old that custom is or the history behind the occasion.

There are several versions of St. Valentine's story to include the Roman Emperor Claudius II. He supposedly decided, in the third century, that single men made better soldiers and outlawed marriage for young men. Valentine, a priest, defied the decree and continued to perform marriages in secret. Claudius discovered this and had him put to death. Other stories say Valentine helped Christians to escape Roman prisons where they were beaten and tortured. The story continues that Valentine himself, while in prison, sent the first Valentine, a letter to a young lady he loved and signed it "from your Valentine". This closing is still used today. Although the legend itself is murky and we don't really know where it came from, the stories emphasized Valentine's appeal as a sympathetic, heroic, and romantic figure. So it's no surprise that by the Middle Ages, Valentine was one of the most popular saints in England and France.

Today, we have actual Valentine cards that use many different symbols. These symbols have long been used to convey their romantic message to that loved one. The lace comes from the days of knighthood when a knight rode into battle with a ribbon or scarf given to him by his lady fair. Cupid, god of desire in mythology, carried a bow with arrows that carried love on their tips, lady's hands depicted femininity and fidelity, turtle doves and love birds supposedly chose their mates for life on February 14th, and of course, the rose speaks of love. If you rearrange the word rose, you get Eros, the ancient god of Love.

In Victorian times, everyone was well versed in what is called the language of flowers. Every flower has a special meaning and any bouquet given was chosen carefully by flower type to convey the correct meaning. If you are planning to send or give flowers for Valentine's Day, you might consider the various types and meanings before selection. For instance, the Anemone is symbolic of unfading love, the aster of love's preference, the azalea means take care of yourself for me, fragile passion and is the Chinese symbol of womanhood. The bachelor button means celibacy, the bluebell means humility and constancy, and baby's breath is everlasting love. Of course, if you send a withered bouquet it means rejected love!

Carnations are classified by color, with the red meaning my heart aches for you, the pink for I'll never forget you, white for pure love, and striped for no, I can't be with you, and yellow is rejection and disdain. The clover means good luck, coreopsis is always cheerful, cyclamen for resignation and goodbye, daisy is for innocence, eucalyptus is protection, forget-me-not means true love and memories, gardenia (my personal favorite) secret love and you're lovely, iris is for faith, hope and wisdom, ivy fidelity and friendship, jonquils means love me, affection returned, and desire.

There are many other flowers and their meanings, too many to list here. If you are interested in finding out more, just type in "language of flowers" to Google search and the various sites will pop up. Of course, we can't leave the topic of Valentine's Day without discussing the rose and its meanings. Every color of rose has a different meaning and I will discuss a few here to prepare you to make selections for that special person.

Of course, the red rose in general means, I love you and love. But if you want to get specific and truly meaningful you could select some of the white for eternal love, pink for perfect happiness, yellow for friendship, red and white means unity and together, a thornless rose signifies love at first sight, a rose bud alone means beauty and youth while a red bud is for pure and lovely. A full bouquet of roses is gratitude and a single rose in full bloom means I love you, I still love you! Add a sprig of rosemary and you will add remembrance to the bouquet.

For those true romantics, don't forget the spider flower (cleome hasslerana) which means elope with me! So enjoy one of the romantic days of the year and express yourself to a loved one by telling them how much they mean in the "Language of Flowers".