



By: Dave Long, UCCE Master Gardeners of Lake Tahoe

Meaning and Symbolism of Flowers & Plants at the Tallac Estates

For centuries or even millennia, poets, priests, and royalty have ascribed meaning and symbolism to certain plants and flowers. For the priests (and many early scholars) the idea that the gods, or God would show the use or value of a plant based on some physical trait (the shape, color, location grown) known as a sign or signal. This system of plant values evolved to become known as *Doctrine of Signatures*, which had a hiccup in its acceptance of validity when plants from the new world and exotic locations came to Europe along with description of uses from their native lands. Many plant common names refer to some assigned characteristic based on these aspects. Lungwort, for example, which kind of looked like a lung was thought to treat lung ailments, Spleenwort, Liverwort, similarly had name/treatment relationships. The Eyebright, whose flowers look like eyes was used for treating eye infections. Soldiers Wound Wort (yarrow) treated bleeding wounds, with the plant's mature seed head reminiscent of a healing wound (scab).

Poets had their way in embodying meaning of flowers into verse, and vice versa. A good example is Black Eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*), a member of the sunflower family. It is not completely clear if the flower was named after the poem by John Gay or he wanted to evoke the feeling of the flower following the sun – looking for something. In any event the poem and flower were tied together. The first verse being:

All in the Downs the fleet was moor'd,
The streamers waving in the wind,
When black-eyed Susan came aboard;
'O! where shall I my true-love find?
Tell me, ye jovial sailors, tell me true
If my sweet William sails among the crew.'

The associated result is that another flower, *Sweet William*, is often planted nearby. As the sun turns the heads of Black Eyed Susan, she'll gaze upon her beloved, *Sweet William*. Both plants bloom at the same time and do well together in the garden.

Royalty's favored flowers and plants provided symbolism to those blooms chosen. The yellow iris of France morphed into the gold *Fleur-de-lis*. The same iris that Charlemagne required to be grown at all noble estates, monasteries, and abbeys. The Japanese Emperor sits on the *Chrysanthemum Throne*.

The assignment of emotions or meaning to plants and flowers in particular is referred to as floriography, also called the language of flowers. It could be called languages of flowers as differing

cultures may place different meaning on the same bloom. The meanings, as with language may also change over time, so what was meant in Elizabethan England is not same meaning found in Victorian England. Similarly the meaning assigned certain flowers in the culture of Japan (Hanakotoba) differ from floriography found in the west. The Azalea as an example means modesty or patience in Japan, Represents womanhood in parts of China and in the west means taking care of yourself, or temperance in life.

Here are some floriography examples of the flowers found at the Tallac Estates, South Lake Tahoe.

Bleeding Heart – Lamprocapnos (Dicentra) spectabilis. Also called Lady in the Bath flower and the Lyre flower. In his book, Allan Armitage gives an interesting story about the structure of the flower as it relates to the Cinderella story. This East Asian native has acquired a number of symbolic meanings, with some contradictory and others related to its name. In the far-east, it represented a rejected love or spurned love, while in Europe it represented an open expression of emotions and/or a deep and passionate love between two people, which goes beyond life itself. An extension on this latter theme was the person being too free with emotions (a bleeding heart).

Candytuft – Iberis spp. The plant is native to southwestern Europe and often used as a flowering groundcover, symbolizes indifference.

Larkspur – Delphinium spp. There are any number of Larkspurs in horticulture, here in Tahoe the common native is Delphinium glaucum, the Sierra Larkspur. One of the most poisonous plants in California, Larkspurs have numerous symbolic meanings including having an open heart, levity, lightness, fickleness (pink or simple varieties). True delphiniums are associated with haughtiness.

Lavender – Lavandula spp. Used as a cut flower, adding fragrance to a bouquet. Loyalty, love and devotions are its symbolic meaning.

Rose Campion – Silene (Lychnis) coronaria. Grown at Monticello. In Catholic literature referred to as “Our Lady’s Rose,” also called Bloody William. Its floriography is religious enthusiasm.

Red Twig Dogwood – Cornus sericea. A native to moist soil and partial shade areas of the Tahoe basin. This large bush/small tree has white flowers and symbolically denotes durability.

Sage brush – Artemisia tridentate. The state flower of Nevada, the flower symbolizes absence.

Sedum spp. Occasionally used in salads (slight sour taste) and as a living roof plant, it denotes tranquility.

Shasta Daisy – Leucanthemum spp. Actually native to Europe, this daisy can be invasive where sunlight and moisture are abundant. The daisy is the birth flower for April and symbolizes innocence.

Sweet William – Dianthus barbatus. Flowers are edible. There are multiple citations for name meaning. Attracts butterflies. Floriography means gallantry. Kate Middleton included it in her wedding bouquet when she married Prince William.

Veronica – *Veronica* spp. Also known as speedwell, bird's eye or gypsyweed. This flower denotes fidelity.

Yarrow – *Achillea lanulosa*. A common native in moist soils, sometimes in lawns. The Washoe made a tonic for sores from yarrow. The symbolic meaning is healing, but it was also placed on medieval thresholds to keep evil spirits from entering. Yarrow also could be used to foretell your future spouse, through dream, if a quantity was placed under your pillow at night and you recited the proper incantation. Another name for Yarrow was woundwort, as it was said to stop bleeding when used as a poultice. Yarrow is a frequent component in various herbalist remedies. The leaf is sometimes called Venus' eyebrow.

The information on floriography and Doctrine of Signs relating to these plants was developed as part of a longer term project at the Tallac Estates to promote and enhance interest in the gardens at the Estates. Additional assistance is welcomed with this project. Please contact Master Gardeners of the Tallac Site to get involved.

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