

## The Language of Flowers

The idea that flower bunches or arrangements conveyed a series of secret meanings between covert lovers was popularised in Europe, especially France in the early 1800s. It was thought to come from Turkey where flower arrangements were used to convey messages between lovers - with each stem having a particular meaning. In the harems of the Middle East, the rose and other flowers were used as a secret means of communication between lovers who were not allowed to express their love for one another openly. This is, unfortunately, a myth, but there is some truth there.

This 'secret' language using flowers was first introduced into Europe through the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in 1718. Writing to her lady friends from Turkey, Lady Mary described a system that used objects, including flowers, to communicate. Each object signified a small verse. A pearl, for example, meant 'Pearl, fairest of the young'. A huge range of objects were used, including flowers, fruits, other foods, to pebbles and even coal. A Turkish love letter therefore could be a purse containing any number of objects, not just flowers.

This romantic notion that illicit lovers could speak with each other through a 'secret' language quickly gained favour in 18th century Europe. By the early 19th century, this had evolved into a published list of the Language of Flowers, and was perhaps first published by Charlotte de Latour in 1819, but several books exploring this concept were published in France between 1811 and 1820. Many contained the first lists where individual flowers were given specific meanings. Where these meanings came from is anyone's guess, and many books differed from each other about these specific meanings.

This ambiguity continues today. There is no one agreed list of meanings - each one will differ from the other depending on what historical origin they use. So don't be surprised if you find four different meanings for a certain flower from four websites or books! What seems clear is that each author embellished the language, with the result that each list changed the previous one. In addition to the lists, other symbolic meanings were attached, including certain arrangements indicating a time of a desired meeting, the use of rings along with flowers, or the position of the flower when it is handed over (upright or upside down).

Regardless of this, the Language of Flowers quickly gained popularity throughout Europe as Charlotte de Latour's book was printed in several languages, along with many other volumes. It seemed to be a requirement that each new volume must criticise previous work and 'set things right' with a new interpretation, which of course just added to the confusion, but did not seem to detract from its popularity. Traditional European significance were added to the mostly manufactured 'harem' meanings and new flowers added, which again altered the situation.

In modern times very few of these meanings still exist in common usage. A red flower means passion or love, white flowers, such as lilies, purity. Interestingly the evolution of flower meanings is still continuing today. Daffodils now mean 'hope', rather than 'unrequited love' as they have been adopted by cancer research organisations and used in fund raising.

For a more detailed and scholarly account of the Language of Flowers try and find a copy of 'The Culture of Flowers', by Jack Goody, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

### A short list of some flower meanings

*(some derived from 1800-flowers.com)*

**Acacia** - Secret love  
**Achillea** - Healing & comfort  
**Amaryllis** - You are sought after  
**Aster** - Symbol of love - Daintiness  
**Azalea** - Take care of yourself for me, Temperance, Fragile Passion  
**Bachelor Button** - Single blessedness  
**Begonia** - Beware  
**Bells of Ireland** - Good luck  
**Bluebell** - Humility  
**Withered Flowers** - Rejected love  
**Camellia** - Admiration, Perfection, Good luck, Gift to a man  
**Camellia** (Pink) - Longing for you  
**Camellia** (Red) - You're a flame in my heart  
**Camellia** (White) - You're adorable  
**Carnation** (General) - Fascination, Woman love  
**Carnation** (Pink) - I'll never forget you  
**Carnation** (Red) - My heart aches for you, Admiration  
**Carnation** (Purple) - Capriciousness  
**Carnation** (Solid Color) - Yes  
**Carnation** (Striped) - No, Refusal, Wish I could be with you  
**Carnation** (White) - Sweet and lovely, Innocence, Pure love, Woman's good luck gift  
**Carnation** (Yellow) - You have disappointed me, Rejection  
**Chrysanthemum** (General) - You're a wonderful friend, Cheerfulness and rest  
**Chrysanthemum** (Red) - I Love You  
**Chrysanthemum** (White) - Truth  
**Chrysanthemum** (Yellow) - Slighted love

**Convolvulus** - Tender affection  
**Crocus** - Cheerfulness  
**Daffodil** - Regard, Unrequited Love, You're the only one  
**Daisy** - Innocence, Loyal love, Purity  
**Dead Leaves** - Sadness  
**Fern** - Magic, Fascination, Confidence, Shelter  
**Fern** - Maidenhair - Secret bond of love  
**Forget-Me-Not** - True love, Memories  
**Gardenia** - You're lovely, Secret love  
**Geranium** - Stupidity, Folly  
**Gladioli** - Give me a break, I'm sincere  
**Grass** - Submission  
**Holly** - Defense, Domestic happiness  
**Hyacinth** (General) - Games and sports, Rashness  
**Hyacinth** (Blue) - Constancy  
**Hyacinth** (Purple) - I am sorry, Forgive me, Sorrow  
**Hyacinth** (Red or Pink) - Play  
**Hyacinth** (White) - Loveliness, I'll pray for you  
**Hyacinth** (Yellow) - Jealousy  
**Iris** - Your friendship means so much to me, Faith, Hope, Wisdom & Valor, My compliments  
**Ivy** - Wedded love, Fidelity, Friendship, Affection  
**Larkspur** - Fickleness  
**Lily** (Orange) - Hatred  
**Lily** (White) - Virginity, Purity, Majesty, It's heavenly to be with you  
**Lily** (Yellow) - I'm walking on air, False & gay  
**Lily** (Calla) - Beauty  
**Lily** (Day) - Coquetry  
**Lily** (Eucharis) - Maiden charms  
**Lily** (Tiger) - Wealth, Pride  
**Lily-of-the-Valley** - Sweetness, Tears of the Virgin Mary, Humility, Return to Happiness, You've made my life complete  
**Magnolia** - Nobility  
**Marigold** - Cruelty, Grief, Jealousy  
**Mistletoe** - Kiss me, Affection, To surmount difficulties,  
**Narcissus** - Egotism, Formality, Stay as sweet as you are  
**Orchid** - Love, Beauty, Refinement, Beautiful lady  
**Orchid** (Cattleya) - Mature charm  
**Palm Leaves** - Victory and success  
**Peony** - Shame, Gay life, Happy marriage  
**Petunia** - Resentment, Anger, Your presence soothes me  
**Poppy** (General) - Eternal sleep, Oblivion, Imagination  
**Poppy** (Red) - Pleasure  
**Poppy** (White) - Consolation  
**Poppy** (Yellow) - Wealth, Success  
**Primrose** - I can't live without you  
**Primrose** (Evening) - Inconsistency  
**Rose** (Bridal) - Happy love  
**Rose** (Damask) - Persian ambassador of love  
**Rose** (Dark Crimson) - Mourning  
**Rose** (Hibiscus) - Delicate beauty  
**Rose** (Leaf) - You may hope  
**Rose** (Pink) - Perfect happiness, Believe me  
**Rose** (Tea) - I'll remember always  
**Rose** (Thornless) - Love at first sight  
**Rose** (White) - Innocence and purity, I am worthy of you, You're heavenly, Secrecy & silence  
**Rose** (White & Red) - Unity, Flower emblem of England  
**Rose** (White-dried) - Death is preferable to loss of virtue  
**Rose** (White-withered) - Transient impression, Fleeting beauty, You made no impression  
**Rose** (Yellow) - Decrease of love, Jealousy, Try to care  
**Rosebud** - Beauty and youth, A heart innocent of love  
**Rosebud** (Red) - Pure and lovely  
**Rosebud** (White) - Girlhood  
**Rosebud** (Moss) - Confessions of love  
**Roses** (Full Bloom) - Gratitude  
**Roses** (Single Full Bloom) - I love you, I still love you  
**Snapdragon** - Deception, Gracious lady  
**Sweetpea** - Good-bye, Departure, Blissful pleasure, Thank you for a lovely time  
**Tulip** (General) - Perfect lover, Fame, Flower emblem of Holland  
**Tulip** (Red) - Believe me, Declaration of love  
**Tulip** (Variegated) - Beautiful eyes  
**Tulip** (Yellow) - There's sunshine in your smile  
**Violet** - Modesty  
**Violet** (Blue) - Watchfulness, Faithfulness, I'll always be true  
**Violet** (White) - Let's take a chance on happiness

[◀ Back](#)