

The Language of Flowers

by Mollie Fullerton, Heritage Interpreter

Sometime between August 1919 and July 1920, changes were made to the architectural drawings of Francis Stuyvesant Peabody's Tudor Revival-style mansion in DuPage County. He had purchased five refrigerators to be installed in his home (eventually there would be two more refrigerators added) and wanted the plans altered to make use of the new appliances. To accommodate one of the refrigerators, a cedar closet on the second floor was converted into a flower-cutting room.

In the 1800s, flowers played an important role in daily life and social customs, one that transcended class lines. Upper-class families tended to gardens on their country estates, and lower-class urban households grew flowers in windows and backyards and on roofs. Businessmen often wore single buds or small bouquets in the buttonholes of their coats, and women put blossoms in their hair and garlands on their dresses. Men and women alike gave flowers as tokens of romance. The Victorian practice of giving tussie-mussies, small bouquets of herbs and flowers to express emotions of love or sympathy is well documented, and just as today flowers appeared at celebrations, sickrooms and funerals.



During this time, the genre of sentimental flower books was blossoming. These books were often given as gifts, displayed in homes and occasionally skimmed for amusement. Books with prefaces addressed to “fair readers” or “genteel women” contained anthologies of flower-themed poetry or folklore. Other books presented the world of “floriography,” or the language of flowers, which matched different species with special meanings.

With floriography books still available in 1919 and the addition of a flower-cutting room in the Peabodys' mansion, 21st century researchers at Mayslake Peabody Estate wondered if the Peabodys used the language of flowers to communicate. Would Mrs. Peabody have asked a servant to place a small purple amethyst (indicating admiration) in a bedroom arrangement for an esteemed guest? Did Mr. Peabody watch for oleanders (a signal to beware) as a message from a disgruntled housekeeper? The idea of the Peabodys using floriography is romantic and intriguing, but as we explored the varying meanings for flowers and the origins of the language, it became clear that floriography was more of a myth than a reality.

Floriography books had no agreed upon set of meanings; each book was slightly different. Similar meanings were not the result of a defined language but occurred when authors copied each other's lists. Examples from “Language of Flowers” illustrated by Kate Greenway and Sarah Hale's “Flora's Interpreter” demonstrate the variety among language of flower books.

Flower	Language of Flowers	Flora's Interpreter
Daffodil	Regard	Uncertainty
Dandelion	Rustic Oracle	Coquetry
Daisy	Innocence	Beauty and Innocence
Lichen	Dejection, Solitude	Solitude
Cranberry	Cure for Heartache	Not included
Sage	Domestic Virtue	Domestic Virtues

Stories of the origins of floriography were just as varied as flower meanings. The most persistent origin story attributed it to the “sélam,” a Turkish “language of objects.” It was said that harem girls used the sélam when selecting small symbolic items to wrap in handkerchiefs and smuggle to lovers who knew how to decipher their meanings. This myth evolved from the writings of 18th century travelers. Unfortunately, these writings were largely rooted in misunderstandings of Turkish culture and a romanticized image of the East. Contemporaries tried to debunk the story, yet it still persists today.



The language of flowers itself remains shrouded in myth. Today websites copy and paste these myths from other sites (much like the method used by authors to create flower meanings in floriography books). These same websites romanticize the era, promoting the idea that Victorian lovers used a language of flowers, known by most people at the time, to communicate in an age of repression. In reality, a single language of flowers was not used. But despite the lack of a global language of flowers, the association of flowers with a variety of sentiments and virtues was, and still is, universal. As for the Peabodys, while Mrs. Peabody might have skimmed through an old floriography book from time to time, it is most likely that to the Peabodys and their guests, a rose was a rose was a rose.