

Iris

Iridaceae

Iris is the name of the Greek goddess of the rainbow and the plant was believed to be the personification of the goddess Iris who was messenger to Zeus and Hera. She traversed the rainbow as a path between heaven and earth and the ancient Greeks planted irises on women's graves so that she could lead their souls to the Elysian Fields.

The iris was a symbol of life and resurrection to the ancient Egyptians who associated it with the god, Osiris and his son Horus. It can be seen today in stylised form on the brows of the sphinx that are said to represent Horus. (The flower's three leaves stood for faith, wisdom and valour.) The ancient Egyptians were also using the root medicinally according to their records as early as 1540 BC and Thutmose I (who ruled from 1493-1481 BC) had the flower depicted on the walls of the Temple of Theban Ammon at Karnak. It was said that in the mid-1400s BC when Thutmose III (one of Egypt's most distinguished Pharaohs who ruled from 1479-1425 BC) returned home, after seventeen campaigns that had extended the Egyptian Empire to the Euphrates, he acknowledged the people who had thronged to welcome with an iris.

The Romans dedicated the iris to Juno, goddess of light.

For Christians the iris is an emblem of Christ, and of St. Barbara (which some authorities suggest is an indication of the latter's royal birth although this should be viewed cautiously as her history is enveloped in legend). St. Barbara was originally the patron saint of artillerymen but today is understood to be the patron saint of miners.

Although *fleur-de-lis* translates as 'flower of lily' from the French name there is a strong school of thought that contends that the iris is in actual fact the source of the symbol or emblem as it was often referred to in earlier times as a lily. It has been especially associated with the French kings and according to tradition Clovis I (c.466-511) and founded the Merovingian dynasty, was the first to adopt this symbol. Several differing legends explain his choice. One tells how he wished to commemorate the flower after his men had fashioned it into victory wreaths following the Battle of Tolbiac in 506. Another refers to his victory over Alaric II, king of the Visigoths in 507 when he is said to have killed Alaric as the Visigoth king fled the field of battle. On this occasion so this legend goes the yellow iris was seen growing far out into the River Rhine and this had to indicate the existence of a safe fording area by which his men could cross to the other bank. Victory followed and he adopted the flower in appreciation. Yet another version contends that in the face of imminent defeat Clovis was urged to pray for victory in accordance with his Christian wife's religious beliefs. The iris was a symbol of the Virgin Mary and after conquering his enemy he replaced the three toads on his banner with (three) irises. However the first documented evidence of its use by a French king was in 1150 when Louis VII (c.1120-1180) displayed it on his banner and his shield in the Second Crusade. From then on both the iris and the symbol were called *fleur de Louis* meaning 'flower of Louis'. As time passed this name was gradually modified to *fleur de luce* and then *fleur de lis* or *lys*. Two hundred years later in 1376 the French king, Charles V (1338-1380) otherwise known as 'the Wise', formed the Country's official coat of arms from three golden fleurs-de-lis on a blue ground – and this was retained until the French Revolution which began in 1789.

For the Italian city of Florence, where irises were widely cultivated in the Middle Ages, the flower (in the form of a white lily on a red shield) can still be seen in her heraldic device. The *fleur de lis* also appears in many other heraldic devices, including that of the national coat of arms of St. Lucia in the Caribbean. In the United States the State of Tennessee has adopted the iris as an emblem.

In the West Indies, as the roots often bear a passing resemblance to seated figures, they have been used as voodoo dolls.

Authorities suggest that Chaucer (c.1345-1400), the famous English poet, appears to favour the lily when he writes

Her nekke was white as the flour de lis.

While his peer two hundred years later, Edmund Spenser (c.1552-1599) seems to support the iris in *The Shepheardes Calender*.

Strow me the ground with daffadown-dillies,
And cowslips, and kingcups, and lovéd lillies;
The pretty pawnce
And the chevisaunce
Shall match with the fayre floure delice.

Flower-de-luce has also been woven into several of the plays written by the well-known English bard, William Shakespeare (1564-1616), usually without clarity of definition – including on the one hand *The Winter's Tale*

I would, I had some flowers o' the spring, that might
Become your time of day;
The crown imperial; lilies of all kinds,
The flower-de-luce being one.

and on the other in Part II of *Henry VI*

This hand was made to handle nought but gold;
A sceptre shall it have, have I a soul,
On which I'll toss the flower-de-luce of France.

In the language of flowers *fleur-de-lis* is said to be a symbol for flame, or 'I burn' and the variation in spelling, *fleur de luce*, is said to be a symbol for fire while iris is said to be a symbol for message.