

Lilium

Liliaceae

Lilium is a corruption of a Greek name for Madonna lily (*Lilium candidum*) *leirion*, and is a Latin name for 'lily'.

It seems there is much debate still about the identity of the *fleur de lis* that appears in many heraldic devices. The French name *fleur-de-lis* translates literally as 'flower of lily'. However a strong school of thought contends that this this well-known symbol or emblem was developed from the iris (from the *Iris* genus). After all in earlier times an iris was often referred to as a 'lily'. This argument is explained further in the entry for the *Iris* genus.

This confusion extends beyond the iris to other flowers. Authorities debate the *Lilium* genus and individual species meant by any one author who uses the term 'lily' Authorities debate the *Lilium* genus and individual species meant by any one author who uses the term 'lily'. Sometimes the species is obvious from associated reference to say colour or habitat. But it is not always enough and the flower in question may have no similarity to any 'accepted' lily today eg. rose (*Rosa*), oleander (*Nerium oleander*), crown imperial (*Fritillaria imperialis*), honeysuckle (*Lonicera*), tulip (*Tulipa*), artichoke (*Cynara scolymus*). There are quite a few species that are held to be the 'lily of the field' mentioned in the New Testament of the *Bible* (although the term is likely to have embraced any striking blossom in order to illustrate the argument). Some authorities believe that the English poet, John Gower (c.1325-1408), was referring to poppies (not lilies) in the following passage from his main work, the *Confessio Amantis*

And in the garden as they gone,
The lilie croppes one and one,
Where that they were sprongen out,
He smote off, as they stood about.

For many the Scottish poet, Alexander Montgomerie (c.1545-c.1611) uses 'lily' in a general sense as a flower from the *Lilium* genus when he wrote

I love the lily as the first of flowers
Whose stately stalk so straight up is and stay;
To whom th' lave ay lowly louts and cowers
As bound so brave a beauty to obey.

Similarly most of the many references made to the 'lily' by the famous Englishman, William Shakespeare (1564-1616), are also thought to be of a general nature (or the Madonna lily, *Lilium candidum*), including the following from *King John*

Of Nature's gifts thou mayst with lilies boast,
And with the half-blown rose.

or that from the *Sonnets* (xciv)

For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.

Then again his peer, Edmund Spenser (c.1552-1599) seems to be a little more specific in this extract from *The Faerie Queene*

The lily, lady of the flow'ring field
As bound so brave a beauty to obey.

An old English custom is enacted annually on 21st May by Eton College near Windsor and King's College, Cambridge in the Oratory in the Wakefield Tower of the Tower of London. It is known as the Ceremony of the Lilies and Roses and the date on which it takes place is that on which their founder, Henry VI (1421-1471) met a sudden death. Many believe he was murdered while he prayed in the Oratory – and a marble tablet now marks the spot where it is believed to have happened. After processing with Beefeaters to the Wakefield Tower representatives of the two bodies participate in a brief memorial service led by the Chaplain of the Tower – a service which includes a prayer written some authorities believe by Henry himself. Eton representatives then lay lilies bound with pale blue silk on one side of the marble tablet and those from King's College place white roses bound with purple ribbon on the other. Twenty four hours later the flowers are burnt.

The most common emblems associated since the 16th Century with St. Antony of Padua (c. 1193-1231), who was a much respected Portuguese Franciscan monk, are a book and a lily.

In the language of flowers it is said to be a symbol of falsehood (yellow), gaiety (yellow), modesty (white), purity (white), and sweetness (white).