

Papaver rhoeas

[Synonyms : *Papaver strigosum*]

COMMON POPPY is an annual. Native to Asia, Europe and North America, it has large orange-red (rarely pink or white) flowers with a purplish-flecked centre and many blackish stamens.

It is also known as African rose, *Amapola* (Spanish), Blind eyes, Blind man, Blindy buffs, Blue eyes, Bull's eyes, Butterfly ladies, Canker, Canker rose, Cheesebowls, *Chovannakashakasha* (Malayalam), Cockeno, Cock rose, Cock's comb, Cock's head, Collinhood, Common red poppy, Copper rose, Cop rose, *Coque* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Coquelicot* (French), Coquettes, Cornflower, Corn poppy, Corn rose, Cup rose, Cusk, Devil's tongue, *Divoký mák* (Czech), Earaches, *Errapostakaya* (Telugu), Field poppy, Fireflout, Flanders poppy, Flanders field poppy, Gollywogs, Gye, Headache, Hogweed, *Ilygad y Bwgan* (Welsh), Joan's silver pin, John's silver pin, *Klatsch-Mohn* (German), *Kornvallmo* (Swedish), *Korn-Valmue* (Danish), *Lalposht* (Bengali), *Lal post* (Hindi), Lightnings, Lily of the field, *Mak vlčí* (Slovak), *Mák vlčí* (Czech), Old woman's petticoat, *Pabi Coch* (Welsh), *Paparoúna* (Greek), Paradise lily, Pepper boxes, *Pepprin* (Maltese), Poison poppy, Poppet, Popple, Poppy, Prophetic leaf, *Rakta-posta* (Sanskrit), *Reado* (Esperanto), Redcap, Redcup, Red dolly, Redfield, Red huntsman, Red nap, Red petticoat, Red poppy, Red rags, Red soldiers, Redweed, *Roses à tchian* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), Scarlet poppy, Shirley poppy, *Silkkiumikko* (Finnish), *Sivappugashagasha* (Tamil), Sleepyhead, Soldiers, Thunderball, Thunderbolt, Thundercup, Thunderflower, Wartflower, and Wild maws; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of consolation (red), dreaminess (variegated), fantastic extravagance (scarlet), flirtation (variegated), forgetfulness (white), my antidote (white), my bane (white), and sleep (white).

One plant can produce as many as 50,000 seeds.

Warning – all parts of the plant (except the petals and seeds) are potentially poisonous for humans and animals if consumed to excess.

This poppy can be confused with long-headed poppy (*Papaver dubium*) and round prickly-headed poppy (*Papaver hybridum*).

Rhoeas is derived from Greek *rhoia* (pomegranate) with reference to a similar appearance in fruit and seed and is an old name for poppy.

Common poppy was familiar to the ancient Egyptians and was often depicted (with black spots on the outside) by Egyptian artists. When archaeologists examined the tomb of the famous boy-king, Tut'ankhamun (who was an Egyptian pharaoh of the 18th dynasty, ruling Egypt for 6 years until his death at about 18 in c.1340 BC) it was identified in a bouquet and it had also been carved on the lid of a casket.

The Roman divinities of particular relevance here are Ceres, the corn-goddess (often garlanded with corn and poppies) and, once her cult had spread from Greece to Rome, Cybele, mother of the gods who could be depicted wearing a crown of poppies (its many seeds signifying fertility). Another version of the association with Ceres suggests that she was so tired after searching for her lost daughter that she was unable to help the corn to grow. The poppies in the fields eased her into sleep and while she rested the corn developed.

This is supposed to have led to the belief that the growth of poppies amongst the corn was necessary to ensure a good harvest.

In some countries popular Christian legend holds that the common poppy sprang up from drops of Christ's blood. Such a belief would only have added support to a variety of negative superstitions associated with the flower that were subscribed to generally.

Superstitious people in England thought it was unlucky to bring the common poppy inside (or even to pick it) as close proximity was believed to cause headaches, earache and blindness. (Others contended that the common poppy cured headaches.) Children in several European countries were urged not to pick the flowers as this could bring a thunderstorm, and in Ireland it is said that women were almost in fear and trembling for fear of inadvertently touching the flowers. (Yet for some poppies placed in the rafters protected the home from being struck by lightning, and others showed their children how to make poppy dollies.)

Its connection in Britain with Poppy Day (the nearest Sunday to 11th November) relates to the Flanders Fields in World War I at the beginning of the 20th Century. Common poppy's seeds will remain dormant until the soil is disturbed – and the trenches dug in the fields during that War did just that. Poppies sprang up all over the area. In 1914 Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae (1872-1918) of the Canadian Army (having already served in South Africa and then returned home to become a professor of medicine at McGill) had re-enlisted and ended up in Belgium. Serving as a Medical Officer he pencilled the following words in his despatch book during a lull in fighting at Ypres in 1915.

In Flanders' fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks still bravely singing fly,
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders' fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe;
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch be yours to hold it high
If you break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders' fields.

Somehow a copy of this poignant poem reached the famous English journal, *Punch* anonymously and was published by them with the title *In Flanders' Fields*. Sadly in May 1918 Colonel McCrae died in a hospital on the French coast within sight of the white cliffs of Dover – but his poem lived on and gained a wide circulation. At this point two particular women join the story. The first was Moina Michael, (1869-1944), then the American War Secretary of the YMCA, who felt drawn to reciprocate in both poetry and action. The former included the words

We cherish, too, the poppy red
That grows on fields where valor led,
It seems to signal to the skies
That blood of heroes never dies

– and for the latter she vowed always thereafter to wear this flower in remembrance. The second was French. This lady, Madame E. Guérin, who was Secretary of the French YMCA and a founder of the American and French Children's League,

arranged in France for the manufacture of artificial poppies that were sold to ex-servicemen and their dependants and the profits were used to help those who returned to try and take up their lives again in the devastated war zones. In 1921 when the British Legion established what eventually became the national remembrance day for members of the armed forces who died while serving their Country they adopted the common poppy as the emblem and obtained supplies of artificial flowers from France. The following year the Legion set up its own poppy factory in London – staffed by disabled ex-servicemen. Poppies have also been sold in America before 30th May Memorial Day.

As early as 1500 BC the ancient Egyptians were using common poppy seeds for baking, a practice that continues today. Records also show that common poppy was used in Roman kitchens as well. The young leaves can be cooked and eaten perfectly safely like spinach (*Spinacia oleracea*) or added as flavouring to soups and salads. The petals have been employed as a general colouring agent since the 15th Century in western Europe – and can be used commercially today in food and wine. The French still today extract an edible cooking oil known as *olivette* from the seeds.

The seeds have long been used in veterinary medicine by Arabs and Turks as a horse tonic. Medicinally, herbalists used the petals to provide an eye lotion and a cough remedy, as well as to treat fever. Today they can be a commercial ingredient used by the pharmaceutical industry in medicines for treating chest complaints such as bronchitis and whooping-cough, and also in mild sedatives for children.

This species is sometimes called incorrectly Shirley poppy. All Shirley poppies are actually a variety developed from one capsule of seeds of this species, the common poppy. They were raised by the Reverend W. Wilks in his Shirley Vicarage garden at Croydon near London in the 1880s. None of them have any black marking on them anywhere. The Reverend Wilks was a past Secretary of the Royal Horticultural Society, an office which he fulfilled for 32 years.

White poppy is the birthday flower for 8th May.

Red poppy is the birthday flower for 10th May.

The poppy is also associated with the month of August.