

Pelargonium species

GERANIUM is an evergreen perennial (sometimes grown as an annual). Native to southern Africa (particularly the Cape of Good Hope) it has different coloured blooms and fragrances according to the species or variety.

It is also known as *Geranie* (German), *Geranio* (Italian), *Géranium* (French), Pelargonium, Scented geranium, and Storksbill; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of comforting (scarlet), consolation (scarlet), disappointed expectation (fish), eagerness, folly (scarlet), gaiety (scarlet), gentility, gracefulness (white), ‘her smile the soul of witchery’ (red), ingenuity (pencilled), melancholy (dark coloured or dark red), peaceful mind, preference, recall (silver-leafed), sorrowful (red), steadfast piety (wild), and stupidity (scarlet).

Warning – prolonged handling of the plants can cause dermatitis.

Most of the species are native to the Cape of Good Hope. However a variety found in the Middle East is said by the Turks to have been the original ‘mallow’. It is told how Muhammad (c.570-c.632), the Arabian prophet and founder of Islam, hung his shirt over the plant to dry and upon removing it found the geranium (*Pelargonium*) beneath.

Although possibly sent to England in 1609 scented geraniums (pelargoniums) are understood to have been introduced officially only in 1632 by the English Tradescant family who contributed so much to the botanical world during the 16th and 17th Centuries. At that time the geraniums’ (pelargoniums’) significance was overlooked. Then in 1700 the then Duchess of Beaufort is understood to have imported a rose ‘pink’ geranium (pelargonium) into Britain for perfume. Yet still the British ignored the implications – and it was the French perfumers who recognized their aromatic significance and potential in about 1847. For some authorities the French inspiration combined with a growing enthusiasm in Britain for hothouse plants may explain these plants’ subsequent peak of popularity for the British Victorians. This came to a shuddering halt however with the outbreak of the 1st World War in 1914 when fuel for heating greenhouses was forbidden. Today the perfumery, cosmetics and toiletry industries use scented geraniums (pelargoniums) in items such as perfume, massage oils, bath oils, facial steams, soap and creams.

The essential oil extracted from the leaves acts as a mosquito repellent.

Leaves are used in cookery to flavour puddings and cakes.

The geranium is celebrated by D H Lawrence (1885-1930) the well-known English novelist, poet and essayist, in his poem called *Red Geranium and Godly Mignonette* which begins

Imagine that any mind ever thought a red geranium!

As if the redness of a red geranium could be anything but a sensual experience,

and as if sensual experience

Medicinally, the leaves are used in South Africa for treating diarrhoea. Scented geraniums (pelargoniums) can be one of the ingredients used by the pharmaceutical industry in antiseptics.

Dark red is the birthday flower for 24th November.

Silver-leafed is the birthday flower for 26th November.

Scarlet is the birthday flower for 1st December.