

Peony



Which plant helps when you have toothache?

And does its blossom have an inner clock?

Can a flower make you rich?

Many peonies look really cuddly. Their petals are often crinkled or arranged very close together, producing a large flower that almost seems too heavy for its slender stalk. But you need not worry about the peony – it is so robust that it will appear and bloom year after year in the same place for decades. The peony always blossoms on time, reliably putting in an appearance during the period between mid-May and mid-June. You can often find peonies growing wild in mountainous regions.

The ancient Romans used this decorative plant to adorn their gardens. Later on, Benedictine monks valued the peony for the way it flowers so profusely. They brought it with them from Mediterranean Europe to places north of the Alps. When they founded monasteries in their new homelands, they planted peonies in the monastery gardens. This Mediterranean plant was therefore given the nickname “Benedictine rose” in German, and it found its way into books on herbal medicine during the Middle Ages. Medieval monks and nuns became excellent scientists who discovered by trial and error the properties of many plants.

Hildegard von Bingen was one such person. Her nature studies during the eleventh century were so detailed that many people still follow her advice today. She used peonies for women’s complaints and the “falling sickness,” an illness known nowadays as epilepsy. The seeds of the peony in particular were said to help with toothache. Babies used to wear a necklace of peony seeds when they were teething. The seeds were associated with Saint Apollonia, the patron saint of dentists.

Because peonies have been found in our gardens for so many years, they have acquired symbolic characteristics. Healing powers, gentleness and refinement are just a few qualities they are said to possess. And because the flower is so decorative, it appears in many pictures – even though it is rather difficult to paint.



Marigold



Can a flower predict love?
Can it make cheese more beautiful?
And can you use marigolds to forecast the weather?

The petals of the marigold look like tiny tongues, and they are packed closely together. With their bright yellow or orange coloring, they are particularly magnificent during the flowering season between July and September, although their scent is a little pungent. The marigold is one of the oldest cultivated plants, which means that even in early times people planted and used it once they had ceased to live a nomadic life. It took quite a long time, however, before they discovered its healing properties. During the Middle Ages, the great healer and nun Hildegard von Bingen recommended the marigold for digestive problems. She also recognized how useful it was against inflammation. Hildegard von Bingen called the plant *Ringula* because of the way its seeds are rolled up. Even in those days, essential oils were extracted from the flowers to produce ointments, creams and tea mixtures. People at that time didn't know how the marigold's chemical composition generated these healing properties, but from observation and experience they noted that inflammations quickly died down, redness paled and knotted muscles soon became soft and smooth again.

The marigold, which has the Latin name *Calendula*, grows to a height of about 50 centimeters (19,6 inches). When there is a change in the weather or at night time, the plant closes its flowers. Some highly imaginative people even believe that it can predict the weather, so they take their umbrella with them when the marigold hangs its head. In the garden, however, it makes a *bella figura* (or "fine figure") that provides an oasis for bees, bumblebees and butterflies, all of which collect its nectar.

The marigold grows profusely, and you can use it to play the popular game "She loves me, she loves me not." Young girls, in fact, used to rub themselves with marigold ointment in order to dream of their beloved. We now use the marigold's brightly colored flowers to dye cheese. Perhaps this food dye will act as a love potion if you cut your cheese into the shape of a heart? Why not try it?





Mary Thistle

How did the thistle get its name?

For which poison does it act as an antidote?

What does it have to do with the Virgin Mary?

The Mary thistle is a curious plant. None of its parts seem to fit together properly. First, there is the bare stem, which can grow to a height of one and a half meters (5 feet) and is covered only by fluff that looks rather like a spider's web. Then there are the foliage leaves, which can reach up to one meter (39,2 inches) in length. At the top we see the white-marbled basal leaves, which are crowned by a bright red-purple flower. The plant's nut-like fruits are black.

Mary thistles gets their name from the striping in their leaves, which look as if tears are running down them. Unfortunately, the legend does not explain why the tears are supposedly those of Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. It may have something to do with the story of Jesus' crucifixion in the Bible, and the sadness that Mary experienced when her son was killed.

Mary thistles prefer to grow in warm regions like the Mediterranean, where they may occur in the wild, on wasteland and along the roadside. Pedanius Dioscurides, an ancient Greek physician who lived in the first century AD, wrote that the Mary thistle can be used to cure snake bites. At almost the same time, the Roman scholar Pliny the Elder maintained that the plant was good for diseases of the gall bladder.

Today, the Mary thistle is cultivated in Germany, Austria, Argentina and China for an active substance that it contains. This chemical is beneficial for the liver and works in both people and animals.

When observed up close, the Mary thistle may look a bit untidy. But fields full of the plants are an enchanting sight. They lend the countryside a certain charm, as if a supernatural being has spread her purple cloak across the Earth.





Bellflower

Can a fairy flower cure illness?

Can it grant special wishes?

Is there anything this blossom cannot do?

The bellflower grows in Europe from Sicily to the Baltic on dry meadows, along the edges of woodlands, in low-lying areas and up to heights of 1,100 meters (3,609 feet). It gets its name from its bell-shaped blossoms, which have a delicate appearance. The plant can reach a height of one and a half meters (5 feet). Extending deep down into the ground, the roots grow equally long. People have long been captivated by bellflowers, and some varieties have acquired names that seem to come straight out of a fairy tale, like harebells, fairies' thimbles or the rampion bellflower (which makes an appearance in the story of Rapunzel).

People used to believe that this pretty plant had numerous medical properties, too. The bellflower contains large amounts of vitamin C and insulin, a substance that helps our bodies make energy out of food. The roots and leaves are said to protect against tonsillitis and treat infections. The freshly pressed juice, when applied on the skin, is thought to cure warts. Parts of the plant are also used to make an herbal tea.

In many old children's books, the bellflower is described as a magic flower. English tales claim that its hanging heads symbolize death, while other myths claim you should never take the flower home with you because it brings misfortune. Fairies supposedly have close links with these delicate plants. They can even make the little bells ring, though only magical beings can hear the sounds they make. Mere mortals simply put them in their buttonhole and take pleasure in their fragile beauty.



