

CEMETERY PLANTINGS AND THEIR SYMBOLISM

There are many myths and legends related to trees, plants and vegetation in general, found in all cultures. Some originate from early pagan times and have been later incorporated into other religions. Many relate to the lands the plants originated from. Others have changed over time as these plants were brought into new places as people resettled. While their symbolism is often related to death, which is why they are common in cemeteries, it is also the fact that these trees or shrubs can survive with little upkeep which makes them ideal cemetery plants. In Australia, some were selected to provide a link with common cemetery plants from the regions familiar to the new settlers. But others, like Agapanthus, were simply selected for their hardiness. Cemeteries are usually surrounded by fences and hedges to enclose the consecrated grounds and trees such as Cypress or Pines were a common choice, both for their symbolism and for their long life span. Modern lawn cemeteries with rows of standard roses are a relatively new fashion in cemetery plantings.

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ACACIA:

Immortality of the soul

The *Acacia Seyal*, found in the Arabian deserts, is said to be the Shittah tree of the scriptures. According to legend, Set killed Osiris and put his body in a coffer and set it afloat on the Nile. The coffer landed in Byblos and an acacia tree grew around it. Since the tree had a wonderful scent, it was used to make a pillar for the king's palace. Isis found the pillar and broke it to release Osiris. Egyptians often made coffins from the wood of the acacia tree.



ACANTHUS:

Heavenly garden

One of the oldest cemetery motifs, acanthus is associated with the rocky ground where most ancient Greek cemeteries were situated. When it comes to funerary art, the acanthus symbolises the heavenly garden.

The acanthus plant grows throughout much of the Mediterranean region. Its large leaves appear in many ancient sculptures, especially on top of columns in the Greek style called Corinthian.

One legend says that after a young girl's death, her nurse placed her possessions in a basket near her tomb. An Acanthus plant grew around the basket and enclosed it. One day the Greek sculptor Callimachus noticed this arrangement and was inspired to design the column ornament.



ALMOND, FLOWERING:

Hope, favor from God, Virgin birth

For the ancient Greeks, the almond tree and its blossoms were associated with a legend about Demophon and Phyllis. They had arranged to be married, but before the ceremony could take place, Demophon was recalled to Athens for the funeral of his father. He promised to return, but he miscalculated and arrived three months later to find that Phyllis had hanged herself. As is often the case in Greek myths, the gods were so moved by her love, that they transformed her into the almond tree. Demophon sacrificed to the almond tree, and in response, the tree blossomed.



BAMBOO:

The emblem of Buddha

The seven-knotted bamboo denotes the seven degrees of initiation and invocation in Buddhism. The jointed, cane-like bamboo plant plays a role in Asian folklore. Because bamboo is sturdy and always green, many Asian countries regard it as a symbol of long life. In the creation story of the Andaman Islanders of the Indian Ocean, the first man was born inside a large stalk of bamboo.



BAY TREE, LAUREL:

I change but in death

The classical legend of the Bay tree's origin was Daphne's transformation into the laurel tree during her pursuit by Apollo. Versions vary; one infers that the nymph Daphne was a fiercely independent, rather wild creature and rather than give herself to Apollo, she pleaded with her father, the river god Ladonas, to transform her. Another account indicates that Apollo was wounded by an arrow of Eros (Cupid) and fell madly in love with Daphne, who fled from his advances and was changed into the slender bay laurel moments before her capture. All agree that Apollo was so astounded by the tree's beauty that he claimed the laurel as his own and dedicated it to reward the highest achievements of Greek civilization. Bay was the herb of poets, but also of oracles, warriors, statesmen, and doctors. The leaves were made into wreaths for illustrious poets and the ancients used them to crown heroes.



BLUEBELL:

Constancy, national flower of Britain

The bluebell has always been associated with the 'little folk' and several superstitions have grown from this association. Should anyone ever want to summon the pixies all they had to do was ring the plant as if it were an actual bell. On the other hand if any unfortunate soul should ever actually hear the bluebells ringing then this was a sign that their, or a loved one's, time on earth would very soon end.



BUTTERCUP:

Cheerfulness, childishness

According to an ancient legend, a youth named Ranunculus was known for his beautiful singing voice and stunning attire of yellow and green silk. His voice had the power to entrance any who heard him sing. One day when singing to a group of wood nymphs, he became so entranced by his own voice that he collapsed and died. To honor the fallen youth, Orpheus transformed him into the tiny buttercup that has been known as Ranunculus ever since.



CALLA LILY:

Symbolises marriage

This striking flower symbolises the resurrection of Jesus to many people, or rebirth in a more general sense. Due to the white and waxy blooms poking out of the dark foliage, this flower has earned a connection to innocence and purity.



CAMPANULA:

Gratitude, unchanging love

Also known as Venus's-looking-glass, which comes from a legend in which the goddess of love lost her magic mirror, which reflected nothing but beauty. A poor shepherd boy found the mirror and kept it. When Venus sent Cupid to retrieve her looking glass, it fell to the ground and accidentally shattered. Everywhere a piece landed, a beautiful Campanula began to grow.



CARNATION, RED:

Beauty always new

According to legend, the carnation flower appeared after the Crucifixion of Christ. When Mary wept at the death of her son, her tears fell to the earth. Carnations sprang forth from each spot where Mary's tears stained the earth. This legend lends credence to the theory that the carnation earned its name from incarnation. In ancient Rome, carnations were known as "Jove's Flower" as a tribute to their beloved king of the gods, Jupiter.



CEDAR:

Faithfulness

In China, cedars are called “trees of faithful lovers” – a theme seen in many cultures, because of a legend about a king who sent a good man to prison in order to court his beautiful wife. The imprisoned man died of grief and his wife killed herself. Although their bodies were buried far apart from each other at the king’s command, cedar trees grew from each grave, attained vast heights and lovingly interlaced their branches and roots. Cedar oil was used by the ancient Egyptians in their mummification process.



CHRYSANTHEMUM:

I love, national flower of Japan

According to Japanese legend, in the beginning there were so many gods in heaven that some, including the god Izanagi and the goddess Izanami, were sent to the earth on a cloud-bridge. Once on earth, the goddess created the gods of the winds, mountains, sea, and others, finally dying after creating the god of fire. Izanagi missed Izanami, so he followed her to the place of Black Night. There he found only vile sights and was pursued by the old hag of Black Night. Narrowly escaping back to earth, Izanagi went straight to the river for a purification bath. As he shed his clothing and they touched the ground, they turned into twelve gods; his jewels became flowers, and his necklace a golden chrysanthemum.



CROCUS:

Youthful gladness

The best-known Greek legend about the crocus is the story detailing the tragedy of Crocus and Smilax: The handsome youth Crocus sets out in pursuit of the nymph Smilax in the woods near Athens. During a brief period of idyllic love, Smilax is flattered by his amorous advances, but soon is bored by Crocus’ attentions. After he continues to pursue her against her wishes, she resorts to bewitching him, transforming Crocus into a saffron crocus flower, with its radiant orange stigmas remaining as a faint symbol of his undying passion for Smilax.



CYPRESS TREE:

Hope, pointer to heaven

The Cypress designates hope, as the tree points to the heavens. Known as the ‘mournful tree’ by the Greeks and the Romans, the tree was sacred to the Fates and Furies as well as the rulers of the underworld. The tree would be planted by a grave, in front of the house or vestibule as a warning against outsiders entering a place corrupted by a dead body. Romans would carry branches of cypress as a sign of respect and bodies of the respected were placed upon cypress branches prior to interment.

Due to its constant usage in cemeteries and reflecting the classical usage of planting a cypress upon death, the cypress is still most commonly seen at the graveyard. It is often used as a hedging plant around the perimeter of a cemetery, or as a lone tree above a grave.



DAFFODIL:

Death of youth, desire, art, grace, beauty, deep regard

The Daffodil (narcissus) gains its name from the Greek god Narcissus. According to legend, Narcissus was so enamored with his own reflection in the river that he drowned trying to capture it. The daffodils growing along stream banks soon became associated with Narcissus and took on his name, probably due to the beauty of their reflected image in the water. The ancient Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians all regarded the daffodil as the flower of death.



DAISY, GARDEN SHRUB:

I share your sentiment, hope and renewal

The daisy was once known as "Day's Eye" by the Anglo-Saxons because it opened and closed with the sun's rays. According to Celtic legend, the spirits of children who died in childbirth scattered daisies on the earth to cheer their grieving parents. Ancient Romans believed the daisy was once a lovely wood nymph who shrank into a timid daisy when Vertumnus, the god of spring, expressed his love for her.



Daisy plant:

Innocence of child, Jesus the Infant, youth, the Son righteousness, gentleness, purity of thought

Associated with Venus, the goddess of love, the daisy is commonly used as a lovers' divination by plucking the petals while chanting "s/he loves me, s/he loves me not."



DOGWOOD:

Christianity, divine sacrifice, triumph of eternal life, resurrection

The Dogwood is primarily a symbol of Christianity. It is supposed that the crucifix was made of timber from a large dogwood tree. The flower was also a symbol of reliability and durability during the Victorian era due to the strength of the wood.



EVERGREENS:

Immortality grief

One legend tell of a small bird with a broken wing who could not fly south in the winter. Only the evergreen trees in the forest offered help and succor. The behavior of all the trees was kept in check by the Frost King. So, it commanded the North Wind not to touch even a single leaf of the generous spruce, pine and the juniper trees. However, the North Wind plucked the green shining leaves of the oak, willow and other trees for refusing to help to the bird. The winds left them bare for the winters so that they had nothing to protect themselves from the rain, snow and sleet. Weeping forms are used in a cemetery context to denote grief.



FERN:

Sincerity, sorrow

Also known as Devil Brushes. In England it is believed that hanging dried ferns in the house will protect all the inhabitants from thunder and lightning damage. It is thought that it may rain when the ferns are cut or burnt. The bracken seed of the plant is said to provide magical qualities if you place a few in the pocket - invisibility being the most notable. It is also believed that treading on a fern will cause the traveler to become confused and lose his way.



FLEUR-DE-LIS, IRIS:

Flame, passion, ardour, faith

The Greek goddess Iris was the messenger of the gods and the keeper of the rainbow. Among her duties was that of leading the souls of dead women to the Elysian Fields. Thus, to help her along, the Greeks planted purple iris on the graves of women.

The Egyptians were likely influenced by Greek mythology and used the iris to symbolize their connections to heaven.



FORGET-ME-NOT:

Remembrance, true love

In a Greek legend, God named all the plants when a tiny unnamed one cried out, "Forget-me-not, O Lord!" God replied, "That shall be your name". Another legend tells when the Creator thought he had finished giving the flowers their colours, he heard one whisper "Forget me not!" There was nothing left but a very small amount of blue, but the forget-me-not was delighted to wear such a light blue shade.



FURZE OR GORSE:

Enduring affection

In Irish folklore, all thorny bushes and trees, including the hawthorn, blackthorn and blackberry, were considered to belong to the Sidhe, or fairy folk, and thus be under their protection. These trees were thought to guard entrances to the Otherworld, and so were thought of as sacred or cursed, depending on one's beliefs. As one of the nine sacred woods, branches of gorse would be gathered and burned on the ceremonial fires of Bealtaine.



HAWTHORN:

Hope, merriness, springtime

The Hawthorn is sacred to the Goddess Brigid and fertility. It also has connections to magic, happiness and chastity amongst others. It is also the tree of true partnership, love and commitment. In ancient Greece the bride and groom would wear hawthorn flowers on their heads and the wedding party would carry burning branches of Hawthorn.



HEARTSEASE OR PANSY:

I am always thinking of you

The word pansy comes from mid-15th century French from the word penser; pensee is the feminine form of penser meaning to think or ponder over something. The French word pensee was derived from the Latin word pensare which means to consider or pendare which means to take measure of a situation, to take everything into consideration. The pansy flower symbolizes the love or admiration of one person for another.

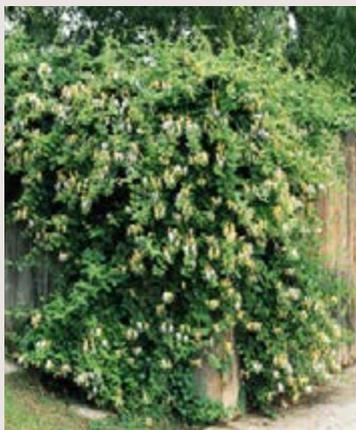


HOLLY:

Foresight

Holly berries, surrounded by green leaves, are brightest in the winter. The Druids revered this plant as sacred. It has been associated with winter magic and believed to repel evil. The Celts of the British Isles and Gaul believed the Holly King ruled over winter and death.

In Scandinavian mythology, the holly belonged to Thor & Freya. The plant's association with Thor's lightning meant that it could protect people from being struck by his bolts. Norsemen and Celts would plant a holly tree near their homes to ward off lightning strikes. The crooked lines of the holly leaves most likely gave rise to its association with lightning, as well as the fact that holly conducts lightning into the ground better than most trees.



HONEYSUCKLE:

Bonds of love, generosity and devoted affection

In Greek mythology Daphnis and Chloe were lovers, but they lived far apart and only could see each other while the honeysuckle bloomed. Daphnis asked the god of love if the plant could bloom longer than a season, so they could be together longer, which is why, according to legend, honeysuckle blooms continually throughout warm weather periods. In the language of flowers it stands for the bond of love, devoted love and fidelity, probably because of the Greek legend of Daphnis and Chloe. The fragrance is supposed to induce dreams of passion.



IVY:

Memory, immortality, friendship, fidelity, faithfulness, undying affection, eternal life, marriage

The leaves and vine of the ivy, which remain green year round, often symbolize immortality. The plant was associated with Dionysus, the Greek god of wine (Roman Bacchus), who wore a crown of ivy and carried a staff encircled with the vine.



LILY OF THE VALLEY:

Return of happiness, purity, humility

The flower is also known as Our Lady's tears or Mary's tears from Christian legends that it sprang from the weeping of the Virgin Mary during the crucifixion of Jesus. Other etiologies have its coming into being from Eve's tears after she was driven with Adam from the Garden of Eden] or from the blood shed by Saint Leonard of Noblac during his battles with a dragon.



LILY:

Majesty, innocence, purity, and resurrection

The Lily was a popular flower in ancient Jewish civilization and is mentioned in the old and new Testaments. With Christianity, the lily became the symbol of chastity and virtue. In both the Christian and pagan tradition, the Lily is a symbol of fertility. In ancient Greek and Roman marriage ceremonies, the priest placed a crown of lilies garnished with ears of wheat, on the brides head, as a symbol of purity and abundance. Lilies are also a symbol of death, and were often placed on graves.



MORNING GLORY:

Resurrection, mourning, youth, farewell, brevity of life, departure, mortality

Morning glories also mean unrequited love. They can be found in Victorian literature and on Victorian gravestones to signify a love that never ended. Conversely, it can mean that a potential love was never reciprocated. Christians believed that the morning glory related directly to the finite nature of life on earth, each single flower representing one life and life being represented by the daylight hours of the sun, withering and finally dying by nightfall.



MULBERRY:

I will not survive you

Tree of Life in the Orient. Commonly known as the food source for silkworms the Mulberry Leaf is considered one of the oldest herbs used by man. The Mulberry Tree was central to life in ancient times, both in the East and West. It has been used throughout Asia, Europe, Middle East and India as a healing food ingredient and as a traditional medicine to restore health. The weeping Mulberry is often planted in cemeteries to denote grief.



MYRTLE TREE:

Undying love and peace, birth and re birth

According to ancient Greek mythology, Venus, the goddess of love visited the Isle of Cytheraea but was ashamed to show herself because she was naked. To hide her nakedness, Venus hid behind the myrtle tree. She later adopted the tree as her favorite and it became known as sacred to Venus. It was thought to inspire lasting love. The ancient Greeks so revered the myrtle tree that they planted them around their temples and places of worship.



OAK TREE:

Hospitality, stability, strength, honour, eternity, endurance, liberty

Jesus Christ's cross was said to be made from oak, often children's graves are placed under or near an oak tree (from pioneer cemeteries) and it is used on military tombs. Combined with the acorn and the oak leaves, the entire symbol of the oak tree can stand for power, authority or victory.



OLIVE TREE:

Peace, healing faith

The goddess Athena was the daughter of Zeus (supreme God of Greek mythology) and Metis who symbolised prudence and cunning. Athena was a warrior Goddess whose attributes were the spear, helmet and aegis. In addition Athena was Goddess of justice and wisdom and protector of arts and literature. Her sacred animal was the owl and the olive tree was one of her most recognised symbols. In Greece the olive tree symbolises peace and prosperity, as well as resurrection and hope.



PALM:

Spiritual victory, success, eternal peace, a symbol of Christ's victory of death

In Christianity, the palm branch is associated particularly with Palm Sunday, when according to Christian tradition palm branches were waved at the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. It was adopted into Christian iconography to represent the victory of martyrs, or the victory of the spirit over the flesh. Since a victory signals an end to a conflict or competition, the palm developed into a symbol of peace, a meaning it can have in Islam where it is often associated with Paradise.



PASSION FLOWER:

The elements of the passion of Christ: the lacy crown; the crown of thorns; the five stamens; the five wounds; the ten petals; the ten faithful Apostles

In the 15th and 16th centuries, Spanish Christian missionaries adopted the unique physical structures of this plant, particularly the numbers of its various flower parts, as symbols of the last days of Jesus and especially his crucifixion.



PEPPERCORN TREE:

Shade

Imported from South America in the 19th century peppercorn trees were often used in dry outback cemeteries as they could survive harsh conditions and provide shade. Often used in cleansing ceremonies in the Mesoamerican traditions. Many survive in Australian country cemeteries due to their hardiness.



PINE:

Fertility, regeneration, fidelity

The Lone Pine was a solitary tree on the Gallipoli Peninsula in Turkey, which marked the site of the Battle of Lone Pine in 1915. Pines which are planted as a memorial to the Australian and New Zealand soldiers who fought in Gallipoli are also known as “Lone Pines” or “Gallipoli Pines”, referencing the original tree.



POPPY:

Peace, rest, sleep, eternal sleep, consolation (red poppies)

The poppy is one of the most widely used symbolic flowers around the world. Ancient Greek, Egyptian, and Roman societies linked it with sleep due to the sedative effect of the plant’s sap and seeds. The Greeks in particular tied it to sleep because of Morpheus, the God of sleep. The Victorians gave the flower a variety of meanings based on the color, including consolation for loss, deep sleep, and extravagance. The red poppy is the traditional flower of remembrance because of its ties to World War I and II where it commonly grew on disturbed ground or graves.



ROSE:

Love, beauty, hope, unending love, associated with the Virgin Mary, the “rose without thorns”

There were many varieties of rose, each with a special meaning, eg. A cabbage rose was ‘an ambassador of love’ and a white rose ‘I am worthy of you’. A red rose symbolizes martyrdom and a white rose symbolizes purity and virginity. In mythology the rose is associated with Aphrodite the Greek goddess of love who was often depicted adorned with roses around her head, feet and or neck. In Christian mythology, a rose bush was also said to have grown at the site of Christ’s death.



ROSEMARY:

Remembrance

Rosemary has a long reputation for improving memory, and has been used as a symbol for remembrance (during weddings, war commemorations and funerals) in Europe, probably as a result of this reputation. Many a bride added rosemary to their wedding bouquets. There are legends that tie Rosemary to the Christmas season. One is that Rosemary was silent underfoot as the Holy Family traveled. The soft leaves muffled the crackling twigs beneath thus preventing detection and ensuring a safe journey to Bethlehem.



SNOWDROP:

Hope, purity, rebirth, consolation

According to legend, Eve was distraught after God cast her out of the Garden of Eden. God sent forth continuous snow and the earth was cold and barren. As Eve sat weeping, an angel appeared to comfort her. The angel caught a snowflake and breathed upon it. The snowflake fluttered to the earth and gave birth to the snowdrop. This delicate bloom came to symbolize hope and rebirth.



STAR OF BETHLEHEM:

Purity, honesty, hopes

According to legend, God created the Star of Bethlehem to guide the wise men to the Christ Child. Once the star's purpose was completed, God thought it was too beautiful to banish from the earth. Instead, the brilliant star burst into thousands of pieces and descended to the earth. The pieces of the Star of Bethlehem gave birth to beautiful white flowers that blanketed the hillsides and they became known as the Star of Bethlehem.



VIOLET, BLUE:

Faithfulness, humility

Violets are associated with various Greek legends. One myth tells us that violets first sprang where Orpheus laid his enchanted lute. In Christian symbolism, the violet stood for the virtue of humility, or humble modesty, and several legends tell of violets springing up on the graves of virgins and saints. European folktales associate violets with death and mourning. Its color may indicate the love of truth or, conversely, the truth of love.



WEeping WILLOW:

Nature's lament, a symbol of sorrow and mourning

The weeping willow is heavily symbolic of grief, sorrow and mourning, even physically, it stands as an analogy to human grief, with its back bent over the subject, be it a weeping figure, a tomb, plinth or any other mourning subject.



WHITE LILY:

Purity and modesty

A story says that as Christ walked the earth all the flowers bowed before him except the white lily. After the crucifixion the lily bowed its head in shame and still grows that way.

The legend is told that when the Virgin Mary's tomb was visited three days after her burial, it was found empty save for bunches of majestic white lilies. Early writers and artists made the lily the emblem of the Annunciation, the Resurrection of the Virgin: the pure white petals signifying her spotless body and the golden anthers her soul glowing with heavenly light.



WORMWOOD OR ARTEMISIA:

Bitterness, death

Wormwood is the bitterest herb known and it's symbolic association is with bitterness of spirit. An ancient legend about Queen Artemis of Caria, tells us that when her husband, King Mausolos, disappeared, she sent searchers looking for him but he was nowhere to be found. She assumed he was dead, and started to build a great monument for him. Although Mausolos did return, he was buried in that tomb (one of the wonders of the ancient world) and gave us the term mausoleum, and Artemis became associated with grief, bitterness, and absence. Often planted as a hedge in Australian country cemeteries to protect graves from wandering stock which would not eat the bitter plant.



YEW TREE:

Sadness, eternal life, sorrow

The evergreen leaves of the Yew tree and its long lifespan came to symbolise Christianity, eternal life and immortality. Some legends say Christ was crucified on a Yew tree. The Romans used the wood for funeral pyres, and it is thought the prevalence of Yews in consecrated cemetery grounds in Britain relate to the Roman influence. They are a common cemetery tree.



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Jan is an historian with an interest in Aboriginal history, local history and the Murray River Region. Between 1998 and 2012 Jan was the Executive Chair of Mint Inc. and for several years has lectured at the tertiary level, including the Master of Public History course at Monash University. Jan was formerly CEO of the Goldfields Library Corporation, Bendigo and Director - Museums at Sovereign Hill Museums, Ballarat. She was also Chair of the Heritage Council of Victoria, taking a special interest in the adaptive re-use of heritage buildings and archaeological sites as tourism components. Jan was appointed to The Greater Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust in 2010 and is a current Trust member.

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