



Introduction

Flowers had powerful meanings in the Victorian Era and were often given as a way to express emotions. However, meanings and traditions change throughout time and culture. Today the flowers of the Victorian Era do not have the same meanings they once did. After discussing symbolism, ask students what is used today to express different emotions. Share a brief history of symbolism as it relates to Victorian flowers:

In Victorian culture, flowers were the language of love. Learning the special symbolism of flowers became a popular pastime during the 1800s when each flower was assigned a particular meaning. Feelings that could not be proclaimed publicly could be expressed through flowers.

Conservatories were built to house exotic plants while floral designs dominated interior decoration. Nearly all Victorian homes would own at least one of the guide books dedicated to the 'language of flowers.' The authors of these guidebooks used visual and verbal analogies, religious and literary sources, folkloric connections, and botanical attributes to derive the various associations for the flowers.

For example bluebells stood for "kindness," peonies meant "bashfulness," rosemary was for "remembrance," tulips represented "passion," and wallflowers stood for "faithfulness in adversity." However, plants could also have negative meanings such as aloe, which meant "bitterness," pomegranate which meant "conceit," or the rhododendron which meant "danger." Flowers also varied based on their colors. A white violet meant "innocence" while a purple violet would symbolize that the giver's "thoughts were occupied with love" about the recipient.

Sending and receiving flowers was a way to show like or dislike toward suitors. If given a rose to declare "devotion" or an apple blossom to show "preference" from a suitor, one might return with a yellow carnation to express "disdain" if it was an undesirable suitor or straw to show a request of "union."

Myrtle was used to symbolize good luck and love in a marriage. In 1858 Queen Victoria's daughter, also named Victoria, carried a sprig of myrtle taken from a bush planted from a cutting given to the Queen by her mother-in-law. This began a tradition of royal brides including myrtle in their bouquets. Most recently, Prince William's bride Kate Middleton included sprigs of myrtle from Victoria's original plant in her own wedding bouquet.

In addition, it was fashionable to display the bouquets of meaningful flowers in what are known as 'Posy Holders.' These bouquet holders often had rings or pins attached to them so they could be proudly worn and displayed by their owners. Bouquet holders were made out of brass, copper, gold-gilt metal, silver, porcelain, glass, enamel, pearl, ivory, bone and straw and often had intricate engravings and patterning. The Smithsonian Gardens' [Frances Jones Poetker Collection](#) has over 250 of these bouquet holders.



Vocabulary

- Victorian Era
- Symbolism
- Horticulture
- Conservatory
- Analogy
- Folklore
- Botanical
- Mourning
- Bashfulness
- Conceit
- Suitor
- Disdain

Length of activity: 30-60 minutes

Age/Grade level: 6-10 year olds with adult guidance

Learning Goals:

- Have students understand how expressing feelings develop differently across cultures and geography.
- Allow students to gain respect and acceptance for the traditions of different cultures.
- Understand the importance of learning history and of seeing differences and similarities with people in history books in a way that brings the characters alive. Converse about why people preserve some traditions while adapting others.
- Studying the past gives insight into the history of countries, people groups, and the world as a whole.
- Students apply history and traditions to their daily lives in order to cultivate the ability to draw connections between the past and present across different contexts.

National Education Standards:

- **Social Science: NSS-USH.K-4.1** Living and Working Together in Families And Communities, Now and Long Ago
- **English Language Arts: NL-ENG.K-12.3,** Evaluation Strategies, **NL-ENG.K-12.4** Communication Skills, **NL-ENG.K-12.5** Communication Strategies, **NL-ENG.K-12.6** Applying Knowledge

What you'll need:

- Pictures of flowers
- Flower meaning labels
- Scissors*

*Starred items are not included in the activity packet

Preparation: Photocopy and cut out images, being sure to keep the nametags with their corresponding images.



Activity:

Discuss: Since flowers had varying definitions, discuss how there are different meanings and traditions in different cultures. Ask why the students think people do not still give these types of bouquets to each other to show their feelings.

- Are there certain traditions that your family passes along?
- What are some things we do in America that people don't do in other countries?
- In Victorian days, how would you tell someone you loved them? How would you convey danger? How would you wish a bride good luck?
- Today, how would you do those same things? Would you use flowers? Why or why not?
- What does the change in some meanings and preservation of others tell us about our culture over time?

Play: Make a matching game between meanings and the images of the flowers. Use this as a quiz to have students try to remember each flower's Victorian symbolism.

Create: Make color copies and cut out the flowers for the students. Then using their own set of flowers, have the students combine the images to create "bouquets" they would give to their friends, parents, siblings, neighbors, etc. Have the students explain what meaning the flowers they chose symbolize based off the chart provided. Then have the students explain what they would use instead of these flowers to convey the same feelings today. Use this opportunity to talk about how cultures may use the same object to convey the same meaning and how meanings change over time.

Flower	Latin Name	Meaning
Ivy leaf	<i>Hedera helix</i>	Friendship
Apple Blossom	<i>Cassia fistula</i>	Preference
Rhododendron	<i>Rhododendron albiflorum</i>	Danger, flee
Myrtle	<i>Myrtus communis</i>	Good luck and love in marriage
Passion flower	<i>Passiflora cerulea</i>	Mourning over the death of a loved one
Rose	<i>Rosa</i>	Love
Lily-of-the-valley	<i>Convallaria maialis</i>	Purity
Bluebells	<i>Hyacinthoides non-scripta</i>	Kindness
Peonies	<i>Paeonia officinalis</i>	Bashfulness
Rosemary	<i>Rosmarinus</i>	Remembrance
Tulips	<i>Tulipia</i>	Passion
Wallflowers	<i>Cheiranthus cheiri</i>	Faithfulness in adversity
Aloe	<i>Aloe, succotrina</i>	Bitterness
Pomegranate	<i>Punica granatum</i>	Conceit
Purple Violet	<i>Viola</i>	Thoughts occupied with love



ROSEMARY



RHODODENDRON



TULIP



ROSE



© G.A. Cooper

LILY OF THE VALLEY



PASSION FLOWER



© G.A. Cooper

ENGLISH BLUEBELL



MYRTLE



WALLFLOWER



POMEGRANATE



PURPLE VIOLET



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IVY



ALOE



PEONY



APPLE BLOSSOM