

Flowers in Culture

By Rebecca Bracken

Is it just me, or did spring come early this year? Other than the brief winter storm and few days of below freezing temperatures, it has been such a mild winter. These warmer temperatures make me excited for spring, because every year there is such a beautiful wildflower show! Flowers such as bluebonnets and Indian paintbrushes will soon be popping up.

Many flowers have symbolic meanings, or are tied to folklore or mythology, and many floral myths have led to the modern flower meanings and associations. For example, peonies may represent bashfulness, which comes from the Aphrodite, a Greek god, catching the gods Paeonia and Apollo flirting. The story goes that Paeonia was embarrassed, but Aphrodite was jealous and turned Paeonia into a red peony.

Apollo, the sun god, seems to be the cause of much pain in Greek mythology, because there was another goddess who was in love with him. Clytie, a water nymph, was heartbroken when Apollo left her for a sea goddess, and after spending days without food and water watching for Apollo, she turned into a sunflower, with her face permanently facing the sun.

And then there's Narcissus, the Greek God who was obsessed with himself. Narcissus was renowned for his beauty, and he knew it. Narcissus was lured to a pond, where he could only gaze at his reflection. He became so upset at his reflection's unrequited love that he turned into a daffodil, which is also called a narcissus flower.

Carnations were often used in ceremonial crowns and garlands, and were used to honor the Greek gods. But they were also used in fortune telling. Tulips may symbolize undying love and star-crossed lovers. Lotuses are considered sacred in some Asian cultures.

Here in Texas, even the bluebonnet has a story behind its importance and adoration. It is said that a nun in a blue cloak mysteriously appeared to the Jumano tribe in the 1700s. When she appeared, the fields suddenly filled with deep blue flowers that were the same color as her cloak.

The bluebonnet became the Texas state flower in the early 1900s, and in the 1930s, the Texas Highway department initiated a dramatic beautification program along state roads. Today, many Texans look forward to seeing the bluebonnets growing across the hill country. For me, it is the start of spring, and I know when I see bluebonnets that I'll soon also see many other flowers making their yearly appearance. My family used to partake in the annual tradition of taking photos in the bluebonnets at a random spot along the highway, joining many others in this local highlight.

While some flowers may not have the best story or myth associated with them, most native flowers will attract different types of wildlife, from bumblebees to hummingbirds. As we go into

spring, look for native flowers when you do your gardening, and who knows? Maybe your garden will turn into an oasis.

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Photo caption: Bees on a sunflower