

The Carnation in Legend and Fable *

by

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A carnation for the buttonhole? In the 16th century it was a sure sign of the wearer's love for his sweetheart; today it is merely a symbol of a man's love to be well dressed.

This perennial, herbaceous, fragrant flower (genus *Dianthus*) has been cultivated for more than 2000 years, and is frequently mentioned in legend and folklore. Some of the more popular legends have it that the carnation appeared on earth for the first time when Christ was born; others say that it sprang from the tears of Mary, which she shed on her way to Calvary. Pliny, whose records of natural history were written some 50 years before Christ, records the growth of the carnation in the Roman Empire for many centuries prior to The Crucifixion.

The carnation headed the Greek list of flowers used in the making of garlands and crowns and, because it was the favorite of the goddess Diane, it became known as the *Dianthus*, which name it still bears. Shakespeare wrote of its use as a "coronation" flower, and it is thought that about this time the wording evolved to the name "carnation" as we now know it.

In Elizabethan times, some varieties of the carnation were used to spice wine and ale, replacing the expensive spices imported from India. Hence it became known at that time as the "sop-in-wine" and, in some parts of England, it still is commonly called by this name, or by the shortened version "wine-sop." It is interesting to note in this connection that the early name "gilliflower" was a corruption of the Latin word "*caryophyllum*" meaning clove, indicating its possible use by the Romans as a spice.

In Korea, as well as other parts of the East, the carnation is considered to have powers of divination. A cluster of three flowers on a single stem is worn in the hair. If the top flower dies first, the last years of one's life will be difficult; if the bottom one dies first, youth will be sad. If all three die together, life will indeed be difficult. If all three remain fresh for over the required period of time, life will be pleasant throughout for the wearer. The variety *Dianthus sinensis* is the carnation used most commonly for this purpose because of its top-branching habit.

The original type carnations, native to the Mediterranean area and the East, were single-flowered, five-petaled blossoms. The carnation as we know it today--a perpetual flowering plant with large double flowers--was developed in America beginning about 1852. Since that time, the American carnation has become the greenhouse crop second only to the rose in the United States, and it retains its place as a favorite of today's counterpart of the Greek garland maker, the modern floral designer.