



BY VICTORIA SECUNDA

# LEGENDS LINGGO AND LORE

*... of some of my all-time favorite flowers*

IN THE BLEAK MID-WINTER, made bleaker by a plummeting economy, it's cheering to know that out in the garden at least, things are looking up. This annual mood-elevation is most keenly felt in early spring, with the emergence of perennials piercing the soil. The borders bristle with "pokers"—crimson peony "eyes," blue-green daffodil spears, chartreuse spikes of ornamental grass—which to me are the very embodiment of hope.

But it isn't just the signs of spring that delight; it's also the names by which cherished flowers are known, and the bewitching fables and history attached to them. Like most gardeners, I of course have my favorites, which fill my heart—and my house—with time-honored enchantment throughout the growing season. Herewith, the top six:



**PEONY** According to Greek mythology, the peony (*Paeonia*, to Linnaeus nomenclature mavens), was named for Paeon, a student of Asclepias, the god of medicine. Whether in herbaceous or woody form, this voluptuous, perfumed beauty has been in cultivation in Eastern Asia for roughly 2,500 years, featuring prominently in Chinese and Japanese art, as well as in traditional Chinese medicine. The roots, bark, and flower seeds were prized for their alleged "curative" powers (NB: don't try this at home), among them, to cool and nourish the blood, and to reduce pain. Because of their ravishing ornamental value, they were grown in imperial gardens and were under imperial protection. In 1789, the Chinese tree peony was transported to Kew Gardens



in England; peonies arrived in the U.S. in the 1830s; were bred extensively in France in the 1880s; and in 1903, the Qing dynasty declared the peony to be the national flower of China, a designation that did not hold (“official flower” status has been a matter of ongoing political debate). Peonies are said to symbolize royalty, wealth, honor, shyness, and above all, longevity; a single plant can live a century or more, and divisions are often handed down from generation to generation. Today there are 1,000 varieties of tree peonies to be found in China alone, and herbaceous and woody types are so popular in this country—the American Peony Society was formed in 1902—that Indiana chose it as its state flower.



**IRIS** Also of Greek origin, the word “iris” refers both to the human eye and to Iris, the Greek goddess of the rainbow and messenger of the gods. History tells us that irises were propagated in Greece between 3,000 and 4,000 years ago, and, in ancient Egypt, were used medicinally, primarily as a purgative, and cosmetically, to help banish freckles. The iris signifies faith, wisdom, and valor, and is associated with the Virgin Mary and saintliness. Indeed, the iris is the “fleur” in Fleur-de-lis, and has appeared as a royal symbol on the banners of the French monarchy, on the coats of arms of Spain and the Medicis in Italy, as a design motif on the crown jewels of England and Scotland, and on Papal crowns. Today it is the national flower of France and, in our country, is the state flower of Tennessee. Taxonomists estimate that there are 300 species and thousands of varieties of the plant under the classifications of Siberian, bearded, and wetland-loving “flag” iris, in a “rainbow” of hues—hence, the word “iridescent.”

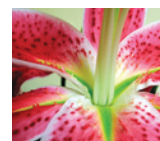


**HYDRANGEA** This flower is as old as the American hills; fossils reveal that hydrangeas grew as many as 70 million years ago in North America and are native to the region. The name, again, comes from the Greek: *hydro*, or water, and *angeion*, or vase. On the bright side, the flower represents love, gratitude, and enlightenment; on the dark side, it connotes instability and vanity (a spot-on description of your gardening columnist; small wonder I’m mad for the

plant, but then so, too, was the feckless, albeit pulchritudinous, Tsarina Alexandra of Russia, devotee of hydrangeas but also of that nutter, Rasputin). There are at least 80 species of the plant, including “mop-heads,” climbing vines, shrub-form PeeGee (short for paniculata ‘Grandiflora’), and fall-blooming paniculata ‘Tardiva’—“paniculata” refers to the pinnacle shape of the blossoms. ‘Tardiva’ blooms are divine when dried. Here’s how: Cut the blooms on 18-inch stems just as they begin to turn pinkish in September, remove the leaves, tie the stems together, and hang them upside down in a cold spot—the garage is ideal—for several weeks. When thoroughly dry and stiff, they’ll last indefinitely indoors in baskets and other containers.



**CLEMATIS** Like fuzzy bumblebees defying aerodynamics in their ability to take wing, brittle-stemmed, fragile clematis vines seem to defy the elements by withstanding high winds in winter and going on to produce spectacular blooms in a breathtaking array of colors and shapes. The name—again with the Greek—derives from *klema*, meaning vine. Lore has it that clematis represents mental and physical beauty, but, on the flip side, also deception, artifice, and deceit (witness clematis’s velvet-gloved steeliness). There are an estimated 280 species of clematis, over 100 of them native to China, but they’ve been found pretty much everywhere, from the tropics to Siberia. Ancient Romans believed that when trained up walls of houses, clematis would protect dwellings from thunderstorms. In Japan, cultivars date back to the 13th century; clematis have been staples of British gardens since 1569; and today there are an estimated 400 cultivars extant.



**ORIENTAL** Asiatic Lilies: Not to be confused with the more plebeian daylily (don’t get me wrong, I’m a *hemerocallis* fan)—nor Calla, Canna, Toad and water lilies—true liliiums, such as “Casa Blanca” and “Stargazer,” have been cultivated for more than 3,000 years. Legend has it that these much-revered, aristocratic flowers sprang from the tears of Eve as she left the Garden of Eden. The tombs of Egyptian pharaohs were decorated with images of white lilies, which

represented death, hence were displayed at funerals. But lilies are also symbols of purity and chastity, and in China, the word for “lily” means “forever in love.” In ancient Greece and Rome, Madonna lily bulbs were used in an ointment to treat skin inflammations and to prevent wrinkles. Madonna, aka Easter lilies, were discovered in the islands of southern Japan in 1777, and sent to England in 1819; today there are 110 species of *lilium* and 250 genera, or subspecies.



**BAPTISIA** Here’s another Yankee native, known also as Wild Indigo, False Indigo, and Rattlesnake Weed (because of the sound made by dried seed pods). The name, from the ancient you-know-what, comes from “bapto,” meaning to dip or immerse (don’t you love being linguistically *au courant*? Think “baptism,” etc.) False Indigo, which thrives in meager soil, was used by Cherokee Indians as an inexpensive source of blue dye (relative to the pricier true indigo, aka *Indigofera tinctoria*, native to the tropics), and, medicinally, to treat toothaches and nausea; as an antiseptic; and as a mouthwash. Of special interest, according to Allen M. Armitage’s *Armitage’s Native Plants for North American Gardens*, is that in the mid-1700s, the English government contracted with farmers in South Carolina and Georgia to raise the budget-friendly plant for export to the British empire. Baptisia, which also comes in white, maroon, and pale yellow, gives new meaning to the word “tenacity”—once established, it would take the combined heft of an Olympics wrestling team to transplant it.

Anyone who has grown these and other magnificent flowers is, in a sense, both a horticultural historian and a visionary. Certainly, as the above pedigrees and legends suggest, nurturing these flowers is a mystical experience which has been shared down through the ages. What could be more uplifting in these hard times, when the future can seem so uncertain, than to participate in this timeless endeavor and, in so doing, to brighten the future? Not for nothing did the noted garden photographer, Marina Schinz, say, “Gardening is an exercise of optimism.” Seen in this light, the garden spade serves as a magic wand. You can bury a lot of troubles digging in the dirt (thank you, unknown author). And in return, the garden will never fail you. ■