

The Flowers of Our Lady

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In an earlier world, flowers whose beauty was regarded as exceptional were seen as symbolic of the all-virtuous mother of Jesus. Marigolds are just one of the many flowers named for the mother of Jesus. In the spring, there is marsh marigold and lady's smock. There are too many to list them all, but among the most familiar are lady's smock, which can sometimes paint an entire wet meadow with its pink blossoms, lady's mantle, lady's bedstraw and marsh marigold. Many others – without specific reference of her name – became symbolically associated with the Virgin Mary.

At harvest time in days gone by, cornfields were a blaze of colour: a kaleidoscope of scarlet poppies, blue cornflowers, pink corn cockle and the golden daisies named for Our Lady: the corn marigold. With the advent of herbicides much of the colour has been drained from this cornfield rainbow. The only place you are likely to find corn marigold in any numbers today is on an organic farm.

Among the most peculiar of the many diseases the plant was prescribed for was jaundice, because its yellow colour suggested a hint from God that there was a connection.



This is the doctrine of signatures again, the idea that God, who had (or so we presumed) made all things primarily for us, would have left clues in the plants as to what their intended use was! So, a decoction of corn marigold drunk 'coming out of the bath of them that have yellow jaundice, doth in short time make them well-coloured'. Mixed with oil, resin and frankincense, the flowers absorbed 'hard swellings' (i.e. tumours).

A much more familiar cousin of corn marigold – a close relative indeed, in the same *Chrysanthemum* genus – is the ubiquitous ox-eye daisy, better known throughout Ireland as the dog daisy, which is ubiquitous along roadsides and railway embankments, quarries, waste ground and cemeteries. In its way this too is a Mary flower, but in this case

Ox-eye daisy flowers in a meadow



the Mary association was with Mary Magdalene.

There are something like 18,000 species of daisies worldwide, and even though the flowers vary greatly in colour and size, and range in form from aquatic herbs to tall timber trees, all the flowers have the same floral blueprint. Each 'daisy flower' is, in fact, not a single flower but an inflorescence, comprising up to hundreds of tiny individual florets, all arranged in a central disc of bisexual disc florets enclosed in a ring of female ray florets, in each of which the petals are flag-like, and whose job it is to draw the attention of passing pollinators to the 'flower'. In our familiar daisy and ox-eye daisy the disc florets are golden yellow, the ray florets white. In corn marigold both are gold coloured. And across

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the world, different species range in colour right across the rainbow.

What the association of so many flowers with Our Lady and the saints shows in a particularly clear way is how deeply Christian imagery informed everyday life in the medieval centuries of Christian Europe especially. The number of flowers associated with Our Lady has grown over the centuries, and in recent times 'Mary Gardens' have been growing in popularity; although it's not an entirely new fashion, as there is a hint in the Life of St Fiacre (AD 600–670) that he had planted and maintained something along those lines!

In the most ambitious of Mary Gardens today, there are hundreds of species. Mariana 1 (a provisional list of plants with religious under/overtones) has something like 600. In Ireland one of the best-known Mary Gardens is at the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption in Howth.

For more information on Mary Gardens worldwide you can go to <https://udayton.edu/marianlibrary/marysgardens/b/background-on-marys-gardens.php>