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## Flowers: Legends, Myths, Symbols

### *An old fascination*

In time, flowers generated thousands of legends and myths. These legends speak about their powers and magical virtues. No wonder flowers have their secret languages. The rose is by far the flower most charged of symbolism and meaning. 25 Ma year old petrified fossils of roses (*Rosa* sp) were found. The oldest known human representation of a flower is that of a 7,000 years old rose carved on a silver medal found in a tomb from the Altay Mountains region (southern Siberia). 5,000 years ago, the rose was cultivated in the Middle East (Babylon, Persia and Syria). From here, the rose reached the second most important cultivation centers in antiquity: Greece and Rome. A third area is constituted by eastern countries: China, Japan and India. Written sources from the ancient Summer (Ur and Akkad), testify that king Sargon I (roughly 2400 BC) brought from Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), after a military campaign, amongst other loots, vine, fig trees and... roses. In the ancient Egypt, the rose cultivation entered very late, around 3rd century BC, under the Greek Ptolemaic dynasty. The ancient Greeks and Romans identified the rose with their goddesses of love (Aphrodite, respectively Venus). Greeks said that one day Chloris, the nymph, encountered a dead nymph and turned it into a flower. Aphrodite gave her beauty. The three graces gave her charm, joy and exuberance. Dionysus offered her the perfumed nectar, while Zephyrus, the west wind, blew the clouds so that Apollo might bath the flower in sunlight. In the end, the flower was given to Eros, the God of Love, who chose the rose as "the Queen of the Flowers". The Roman legend says that Rodanthe was a woman assaulted by many suitors. She was interested in none of them, but the young were so in love with her, that they assaulted her house, even tumbling its gate. Angered, the goddess Diana turned the woman into a flower and the suitors into its prickles. In Rome, a wild rose would be placed on the door of a room where confidential matters were discussed. The phrase "sub rosa" (under the rose) meant to guard a secret. The rose represents, in the western world, the symbol of life, love and regrowth. In India, the rose symbolizes the perfect beauty. In China, it is the symbol of youth. Red roses mean "I love you". Red and white roses mean unity, pink means grace and fragility, yellow means joy. Passionate persons can send orange or coral colored roses. Burgundy red roses will render homage to the unknown beauty of the loved person. A sole rose means simplicity. White roses must not be confounded with roses' white buds. The first mean "You're divine", the second say "You're too young for love". Do not offer roses if you do not want to send the message "I love you". Early Christians regarded the five petals of the wild rose as the five wounds of Jesus, but they hesitated to adopt it because of its association with Roman excesses and pagan rituals. Eventually, the red rose was adopted as a symbol of the blood of the Christian martyrs. Later, roses also came to be associated with the Virgin Mary. Similar love signification is possessed by other flowers, too: red chrysanthemums, tulips or carnations. Daisies render a homage to the loved person, while the calla wants to pay homage to an exceptional beauty. You cannot send a lilac branch just once, as it symbolizes the first love, while gardenias betray a secret, shared love. Violets symbolize affection. In China, the queen of the flowers is the peony. It is the symbol of beauty, intelligence and character force. The legend says that one day, an empress ordered to all the flowers to open at the same time. Only the peony dared to stay closed. In India, if you know how to prepare the iris, the flower will turn you "magical". During a conversation, everybody will be by your side. Hibiscus species live all around the tropics, but the most popular is the Chinese hibiscus, called Chinese rose in some countries. It is original from China and India, and in many countries this is the flower of love: it is used in perfumes and to make wedding

garlands. In the East and Africa, the [lotus](#) represents the creation, fecundity and the woman. In Egypt, the sun god [Ra](#) was born from a lotus flower. In Mali, Dogon lactating women eat lotus leaves. For the Romans, the laurel was the tree of victory. The conquerors and the good students were crowned with laurel. Hence the word "baccalaureate" (adorned with laurel berries). You can ridicule the vanity of a person by sending him/her daffodils, the flowers of self love. Petunias symbolize anger and resentments, while sunflower is associated with arrogance and fake appearance. Cactus flowers mean soul warmth, while holy basil transmits hate. We admire [orchids](#) for their beauty, but Indigenous populations give them medicinal uses. In the Amboina Island (Indonesia) a paste made of *Grammatophyllum* is used against pains and in Malaya, *Dendrobium* fights skin infections. In South Africa, Zulu use *Habenaria* and Swazi the *Lissochilus* genera. The tribes of Amazon believe that the flowers of *Epidendrum bifidum* *Spiranthes* protect people against diseases.