

Poppy



Flanders poppy
Remembrance Day
November 11



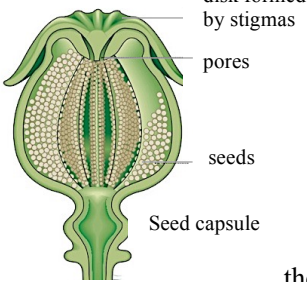
Lovely blooms with colourful, almost paper-like petals are the hallmarks of the flowers, swaying in the breeze, the very essence of our late spring/early summer. There are several types, from the annual *Papaver rhoeas*, called the field poppy, corn poppy or Flanders poppy to those large-flowered perennial Oriental poppy and the Arctic poppy or Icelandic poppy – hardy but short-lived perennial – usually grown as a biennial or even an annual. All are very attractive plants, frost tolerant, and not difficult to grow. They

thrive in temperate climates but also do well in subtropical and tropical regions – the Arctic poppy could be a bit difficult, may not grow well in region with warm, humid summers. They produce a wide range of graceful blooms in red, white, yellow, purple, mauve and pink, some with markings. The seeds take 2-4 weeks to germinate, then foliage appears above the soil line in the form of a basal rosette of curly leaves. Each plant produces one to three main stems, which shoot up from the centre of the basal rosette, each stem sports frilly foliage and ends with a single bud which nods over, turn upward as it opens on long, hairy stalks until it is ready to bloom. After flowering, the ovary develops into a spherical capsule topped by a disk formed by the stigmas, with hundreds of tiny kidney-shaped seeds inside, ready to escape from pores beneath the disk with the slightest breeze! The plants often self-seed, they develop

a long tap root and don't like being moved so take care when planting. For cut flowers, they should be cut at the cracked bud stage, when the bud is just starting to split open, revealing a sliver of colour through the fuzzy green sepals, the flower will continue to open after it is cut, and you may enjoy some five to seven days of vase life.

Poppies have a long history. In Greek mythology, the red poppy *Papaver rhoeas* was associated with Demeter, goddess of fertility and agriculture. People believed they would get a bountiful crop if poppies grew in their field, hence the name 'field' poppy or 'corn' poppy (the name 'corn' was derived from 'korn', the Greek word for grain). The plants do particularly well in disturbed soil where the seeds may lay dormant for years till the soil is disturbed, and then they shoot up and bloom! When they flourished in the battlefield of Flanders during and after the

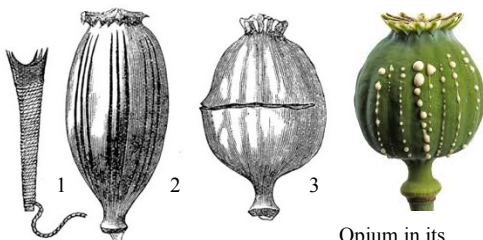
First World War, they became associated with bloodshed, war and remembrance and known as Flanders poppies. With the exception of the Opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum*), grown only by license to produce seeds for culinary use and opium for medicinal use, other poppies are cultivated as garden ornamentals as well as for the cut flower trade.



Opium poppies (*Papaver somniferum*) are large – some are double formed – with frilly blooms in an attractive range of colours. Its botanical name *somniferum* means 'sleep inducing' while opium is a corruption of the Greek *opion*, meaning sap or juice. Records concerning the use of opium poppy date back some 4000 years ago to the time of ancient Sumerian civilization. The Sumerians called the flower 'Hul Gil', the 'flower of joy'. Opium is the exuded sap from small incisions made in the unripe seed pods. As the milky sap oozes out, it turns darker and thicker, forming a brownish-black gum. This gum is collected



Poppy straws



1. Instrument for making incisions
2. Vertical incisions
3. Horizontal incisions

Opium in its crudest form

when it is hardened, this is opium in its crudest form, which contains many types of alkaloids, notably morphine and codeine, the two powerful painkillers that are widely used in medicine. This traditional 'incision' method of harvesting opium is no doubt very labour intensive. Nowadays, a more modern and largely mechanized alternative is the 'poppy straw' method. A machine is used to harvest the entire field, the seeds are separated out for the culinary market by threshing and winnowing, the remainder – the poppy straws – are milled and processed for the extraction of raw opium, further refined into morphine, codeine, heroin etc. Morphine is an extremely effective pain killer, it has brought immeasurable relief from pain for countless people throughout the ages, unfortunately its derivative heroin can induce euphoria, an artificial feeling of well-being that comes with a very steep price tag: Addiction! This beautiful 'flower of joy', with its mind-altering attributes, has been known to giving inspirations to artists, writers, poets, composers creating some beautiful art masterpieces. The smoke-filled opium dens of the nineteenth century may be gone, but sadly morphine and its derivative heroin are still available street drugs, their use connected with crime causing so much human misery. *Papaver somniferum*, the opium poppy, the flower of joy or the flower of sorrow?

In the home kitchen, the slate blue kidney-shaped poppy seeds make a flavorsome topping for baked goods such as breads, cakes and biscuits. The seeds of the opium poppy apparently contain no narcotic alkaloids, neither does the oil extracted from them, although it has been reported that small amounts of opium can be found in poppy seeds, not enough to produce any narcotic effects, but can trigger a positive reaction in very sensitive urine tests for drugs.

I have a favourite poppy seed recipe, it makes a plain pasta dish rather special: Toss the hot, freshly cooked pasta in some good quality virgin olive oil, sprinkle with freshly roasted poppy seeds, garnish with strips of sun dried tomatoes and some freshly torn herb like sweet basil and ... wash it down with a glass of wine. Make sure to use fresh seeds and to store them properly as they contain a high amount of oil and are very prone to go rancid. A lovely simple lunch in the garden on a balmy spring day!