



Gardens of Remembrance

War and flowers aren't a combination that comes immediately to mind, and yet each of the two world wars has come to be associated with a particular flower. In decades past, it seemed almost everybody knew these stories, but more recently I've been surprised by the blank looks on so many faces, particularly young ones. I think they're worth retelling here, in time for Memorial Day.

A Poppy in Your Lapel

*In Flanders fields the poppies grow
Between the crosses, row on row
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

Generations of school children grew up reciting these words, with, we hope, some understanding of their meaning. The poem is In Flanders Fields, by John McCrae, a Canadian army doctor working in Western European battlefields in 1915. He may have written it after witnessing the death of a close friend. The cornfields-turned-battlegrounds-turned-cemeteries, famously churned into muddy quagmires by constant shelling, sprouted innumerable red corn poppies. Some people theorized that their abundance was due to alteration of the soil chemistry by the blood and bodies buried there, but a more likely explanation is that the shells brought thousands of dormant seeds to the surface, where they could sprout. After the poem was published, red poppies became an enduring symbol of remembrance of all the lives lost in war.

A patch of poppies thrived next to the barn at my last house. A previous owner told me they had been planted by her father, a WWI veteran, upon his return from the war. He planted the "wrong" kind—orange perennial poppies rather than annual red corn poppies-- but I treasured them, and carefully transplanted some to my Haddam garden when I moved, in honor of his service and that of so many others. They have multiplied, so, if you'd like to grow a piece of history, some of the descendants of his poppies will be available at the Garden Club's booth at the town tag sale.

Meanwhile, give generously to veterans' groups when they offer paper poppies for sale, and wear the flowers with gratitude.

“The World’s Greatest Desire”

In the late 1930’s, the famous French rose hybridizer Frances Meilland of the House of Meilland realized that another war was inevitable. He chose the most promising seedling from his most recent breeding experiments, No. 3-35-40, and packed off budwood to growers in Italy, Switzerland and the United States. According to legend, the last few reserves of stock were smuggled out in diplomatic pouches, on the last plane to leave France before the German occupation. Not a minute too soon; acres upon acres of rose trial fields were soon plowed under and planted with potatoes and cabbages to feed a hungry populace.

The seedlings shipped elsewhere in Europe suffered during the war years, but the ones that reached the United States were carefully cultivated. No. 3-35-40, a large-flowered, creamy yellow variety blushed with pink, and with better disease resistance than most tea rose hybrids, lived up to its early promise. For five years, the growers painstakingly propagated it, and by 1945, as the end of the war drew near, they had enough stock for a commercial launch.

But what to call it? 3-35-40’s formal cultivar name was “Madame A. Meilland,” in honor of Frances Meilland’s mother, but it still lacked a trade name. Because Meilland believed Field Marshall Alan Brooke (later Viscount Alanbrooke) was the chief architect of the British Army’s strategy in Europe, he offered to name the rose in Brooke’s honor. Brooke declined, saying his name would soon be forgotten (he was probably right: could you have named him?). He had a better idea.

And so the breeders set a date for the commercial launch of the new rose. When they chose April 29, 1945, they could not have known that would be the date on which Berlin would fall to the Allies, effectively ending the war in Europe. The release, accidentally but perfectly timed, stated

We are persuaded that this greatest new rose of our time should be
named for the world’s greatest desire:

Peace.

Since then, Peace has become one of the world’s most widely grown roses (over one hundred million have been sold), and many other varieties claim it as one of their parents. One perfect Peace rose was given to each delegate of the newly formed United Nations when Germany formally surrendered, and again at the U.N.’s inaugural meeting later in 1945. I don’t give tea roses much room in my gardens, because most are susceptible to disease, and are difficult to grow successfully without chemicals. Even though Peace is more disease resistant than most, my previous plantings failed. But, just for this one rose, I’m going to try again.