

History and Legend of Carnation to 1800

by W.D. Holley

Many species of *Dianthus* were found growing wild throughout the Northern Hemisphere around the world. *Dianthus caryophyllus*, the present day carnation, is not known to be growing in its native habitat at this time, although it may have escaped cultivation in some areas. The sketchy historical information available in old publications strongly indicates that the native home of the carnation may have extended from Greece through Asia Minor to Persia.

Theophrastus referred to carnations as *Dios Anthos* (the flower of the gods) which became in later usage the divine flower. The Greeks wove *Dianthus* into crowns for their athletes, this practice possibly leading to the name "coronation" flower. Undoubtedly, the flower about which Theophrastus wrote was a very different blossom from the one which we know today, for centuries of cultivation and development have made many changes and improvements in this flower.

The carnation was known to the Romans as the flower of Jove or Jupiter, the chief god among the Romans. Pliny, whose records of natural history were written circa 50 B.C., indicated that carnations had been cultivated in the Roman Empire for many centuries. Little is known of the carnation from the time of the Romans until the late thirteenth century. It is generally thought that the carnation was cultivated during this period by the monks who no doubt saved seed of the better sorts and had some part in the development of this flower.

Much of the history of the carnation is in the nature of legend; possibly some of it has a basis in fact. One legend as to the origin of carnations is that the Goddess Dianne found a shepherd boy who was too handsome. In order not to be seduced, she tore out his eyes and threw them on the ground. From these, two plants grew, hence the name in French--*Oeillet* (little eye).

More French history, or legend, gives the following story. The carnation originated in Spain and was taken to Tunis where it was much valued as a medicinal tea brewed to protect people from illness.

From Tunis, the carnation was brought to France by the soldiers of the king in 1270. At this time, and for many years thereafter, it was called *Souvenir de Tunica*.

Another story from early French writings has the carnation being introduced into France from Italy by the good King René de Anjou, who was king of Naples, but had been driven from his throne and came to retire in the Var district. He was the first to cultivate carnations in France according to this story.

Other ancient legends about the carnation have this flower being born of the blood of Ajax as he was dying. Pliny, in his writings, called carnation *cantabrica*. It was Pliny who wrote that Emperor Augustus discovered the first carnation growing in Spain. Where legend stops and fact begins is rather difficult to decipher. It is all interesting. The genus and species names of carnation, *Dianthus caryophyllus*, have origins which are rather easily explained. *Dianthus* no doubt goes back to *Dios Anthos* (flower of the gods) as mentioned by Theophrastus. *Caryophyllus* was probably used by Lineaus because of the strong clove scent of the carnation. The Latin name of clove is *Caryophyllus aromaticus*.

The development of the carnation during the late middle ages took place in two main areas. Plants or seeds were probably taken to England by the Normans sometime after 1066. In Chaucer's time (circa 1375), it was known as the clove gillflower, and it is believed to have been cultivated as early as the beginning of the reign of Edward III (1327). Names for carnation found in early English writings include *incarnacyon*, *coronation*, *carnardine*, *gillyvor*, *gyllofer*, *gilofreis*, and *gillyflower*. Shakespeare wrote of its use as a "coronation flower", and it is thought that about this time the wording evolved to carnation. In "A Winter's Tale," written later, Shakespeare has *Perdita* say, "The fairest flowers o' the season are our carnations."

In Elizabethan times, some varieties of carnation were used to spice wine and ale, replacing the expensive spices from India. Hence, it became known as the "sop-in-wine" and, in some parts of Eng-

land the name is still used, or a shortened version, "wine-sop". It is interesting to note in this connection that the early name of gilliflower is a possible corruption of July flower, referring to their time of blooming at this time. However, the word gilliflower also appears in the writings of Theophrastus.

Miller published one of the early dictionaries on gardening in 1731 and devoted several pages to the culture of carnation as they knew it at that time. The clove gillyflowers were still being grown and marketed in quantity, their principal use being for the making of cordial syrup. Miller stated that the recently developed varieties from seed were so superior that few florists were growing the older sorts. Carnations for florist use were grown in pots, protected in winter by cold frames, but ventilated all possible in open weather. Calyx splitting was recognized as a problem.

He described an elaborate method of putting cardboard discs around the calyx and under the opening flower to support the petals and "render the flowers very handsome". Plants were propagated by layering in August and flowered the following June and July.

The tree carnation was introduced into England from France around 1810. Prior to this time English breeders had worked toward picotee and bizarre colors in hardy border strains. With the new characters of the tree carnations, breeders immediately raised their sights to larger flowers and 30 to 45-inch stems. Smooth petal edges were the rage as well as variegated colors. Interest in self colors was at an all time low.

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