

Academy Garden Club Thymes

A NEWSLETTER FOR THE MEMBERS OF THE ACADEMY GARDEN CLUB OF LENOX

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Horticultural Column Poppies

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Papaver Poppies

One of the joys of my time in Tuscany last month was the bright red poppies all over everywhere, mingling with daisies and butter cups, growing in old stone walls, in the grass, in the woods. Just before I left home, I had been pleased to see the beginnings of the foliage of an oriental poppy I had planted last year. But I have never really known anything about poppies other than that there were Oriental poppies, and California poppies, and the breaded poppies that seed everywhere at Berkshire Botanical Garden.

Turns out, there is a lot to know about poppies! First off, most poppies are toxic to people and their pets (although not their seeds) because of their alkaloid properties.

Poppies are flowering plants in the family Papaveraceae, especially species of the genus Papaver. Most are found as natives in the Northern Hemisphere, and they are so beautiful that they have been widely cultivated as garden ornamentals. We think of them mostly as bright red, but there are cultivars that range over the spectrum from white to pink to orange and purple, and there are native species that are an incredible yellow, and one that is a ghostly blue.

Papaver rhoeas are the smallest red poppies, the ones that I enjoyed so much. They bloom profusely in Tuscany and Provence and elsewhere along the Mediterranean in the spring. They bring to mind impressionistic landscapes, and of course, Flanders field and the remembrance poppies. A well-known cultivar of this poppy is the Shirley poppy, which is available in orange, pink, violet, white, and yellow. These poppies are annuals, but they self-seed so freely they actually perform as perennials. They need well drained soil, thrive in sun to partial sun, and grow 12 to 18 inches tall.

The California Poppy (*Eschscholzia California*) is the same size as the Flanders poppies, but not as cold tolerant but more drought tolerant. It also wants well drained soil but is not as fussy as the papaver rhoeas in terms of moisture and nutriment. This is the California state flower, the golden poppy, but also found in pink, red and white. And it also freely self-sows.

The Arctic Poppy, or *Papaver nudicaul*, is a perennial rather than an annual self sower, and is not as easy to grow. It is taller than the little wildflower poppies and needs a northern climate. It is native to sub polar regions of Asia and North America (but not Iceland).

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It has feathery blue green foliage and beautifully ruffled flowers in bright colors, yellow, white, with cultivars in even more colors: salmon, rose and pink. While most poppies flowers are poisonous, even the seeds of the Icelandic Poppy contain poisonous alkaloids. Nonetheless, Icelandic poppies are great pollinators and very good cut flowers.



Arctic Poppy

The Oriental poppies (*Papaver orientale*) which are also perennials are what I think of as *the* garden poppy, the one that is bright red with black markings and fresh green feathery foliage. They bloom early, and then die back and disappear so a gardener must plan accordingly. There are cultivars in many colors, but I think the red is iconic poppy. Like most poppies, it wants well drained soil, doesn't want to be too wet, and dislikes humid heat. This is not a self-sowing poppy. It has a deep tap root and needs to be divided carefully.

The Opium poppies, *Papaver somniferum*, originated in Turkey. They have beautiful gray green foliage with striking flowers up to four feet tall. The flowers can be shades of pink, bright red, purple and white. These poppies are also referred to as the breadseed poppies. Very easy to grow, and they self-seed readily. The seeds need light for germination, so they just need to be sprinkled on top of the soil.

Opium poppies give us the seed pods used in making narcotics. The opium is processed from the sap that is extracted from the opium poppy's seed pod before the seeds are ripe, but the seeds themselves also contain a bit of opiate, although much less when they are dried. Dried, these are the poppy seeds we use in baking, hence the term breadseed poppy. While the small amount of opium in dried poppy seeds is not enough to have any narcotic effect, if you eat enough of them, you might fail a drug test.

The Himalayan poppies (*Meconopsis grandis*) fall within the Papaveraceae family, but they are not papavers. And while the flowers are the familiar poppy form, they are an unusual blue. And rather than sun loving, they want not sun, but cool misty conditions. They are also quite large, with flowers up to five inches across, and growing 2 to 4 feet high.



Himalayan Poppy

One last interesting specimen I would not have included in my vision of poppies: Plume poppies (*Macleaya cordata*) which are a different deal entirely, with flowers that grow in long panicles of creamy white blooms alongside large olive-green scalloped leaves and grows to 4 to 9 feet tall. Native to China and Japan, is not only very easy to grow, it is invasive. It is a great back of the border plant but needs to be watched.

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