

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

December 23, 1953

Symbols of Christmas

Plants have been used as decorations at Christmas time ever since that first Christmas in Bethlehem when, according to an old tale which we recently read, a little shepherd girl who had no lambs, no myrrh or gold to give, was showered with miraculous roses from Heaven which she gathered into a bouquet for the Babe.

Today we will write about some of the plants and flowers that have long been loved by us all.

All of them, the familiar and the strange, have something to teach us. Each has its symbolism. Each can add something to the beauty and meaning of the celebration of our dearest and best holiday. Their story is offered with our best wishes for a happy holiday season.

The Christmas tree, fresh and green through all the storms of winter, shows us that we should keep our hearts alive with gladness and goodwill through all the year. Sparkling with tinsel and ornaments, burdened with presents, and set ablaze with lights it becomes the symbol of this season of rejoicing.

Pines grew in abundance in the Holy Land and so were mentioned with other evergreens to illustrate the prosperity and beauty of life in the days when the Lord worshipped there.

The mistletoe, according to an old legend, was a sturdy tree until the cross was cut from its wood; then for shame it dwindled to a pale, lean vine. But now it is one of Christmas's jolliest plants. "For none may refuse a kiss to him who finds her standing beneath its waxy berries."

The holly, with its dark, glossy leaves and shining red berries, is one of the oldest of the Christmas plants. In that glad season we "deck the halls" with its boughs, making our homes as gay as our hearts. The carolers rightly sing: "Of all the trees that are in the wood, the holly bears the crown!"

The bay or laurel, with its added symbolism of triumph, stands for the hope of victory. It seems to reaffirm that there will be "Peace on earth, good will toward men." The various evergreens have always been popular as decorations at Christmas and have always stood as a symbol of the beauties of spring in the dead of winter.

The laurel grew in thickets and woods from the coast to the middle mountain zone of Palestine, looking prosperous in all seasons because of its leathery, aromatic leaves which retain their evergreen freshness throughout the year.

The poinsettia, known to the Mexicans as the "flower of the Holy Night," is a comparatively recent Christmas flower in America. But its showy blossoms, rich with a Christmas red have endeared it to us all and it has become another universal symbol of the joy and gladness of this season.

One of the very old carols tells the story of the cherry tree, how out of honor to the coming Christ, the tree bent down its branches so that Mary could pluck its fruit. Occasionally its branches, if gathered in the fall and kept in the house through the winter, will break out into early blossom at Christmas time, so the story is told.

An old tale tells that rosemary sheltered the Holy Family from Herod's soldiers during the flight into Egypt. It has always stood for remembrance. Springs of this aromatic plant are added to wreaths and its evergreen branches add their sweet smell when they are used with other Christmas plants. It is a native of the Holy Land, along with thyme, horehound, lavender and pennyroyal.

Christ was called the Rose that sprang from Jesse's stem, the Rose that bloomed in the dead of winter. Thus the rose, blooming in December, takes its place among our Christmas flowers, adding to the brightness and gayety of our homes and hearts.

Legend has it that The Rose of Jerico, a strange plant, not really a rose at all, sprang up wherever Mary stepped during the flight into Egypt. It is perhaps better known as the Resurrection plant, a name it earned because after first closing on Good Friday, it opened its blossoms again on Easter Day. The gradual unfolding and blossoming of the seemingly dead plant symbolizes for us at Christmas the re-birth of joy in our hearts.