

Field Poppy (*Papaver rhoeas*)

What's in a name?

There does not appear to be any reason why this plant was called 'Poppy'. The link is more in the Latin where *Papaver* means food or milk (see Botany below), and 'rhoeas' means red in Greek. A number of the regional names within the UK include 'cop rose' or 'cup rose'. This refers to the button like shape of the plate on the top of the seed capsule. Buttons were once called 'cops'. Other names include 'thunder cup', 'thunderflower' or 'lightnings' (see folklore).

Botany & Ecology

Field Poppy first flowers in late May, early June and may also bloom again in October. The field poppy is multi-stemmed, growing up to 70cm in height. Each stem holds one large flower (50-100mm across), with four bright red petals overlapping each other and a black spot at the base. The flower stem is usually covered with coarse hairs which grow at right angles to the surface. The capsules are hairless, slightly egg-shaped and less than twice as tall as they are wide. Like many other species of *Papaver*, the plant exudes a white milky sap or latex when the tissue of the capsule is broken.

The species is more or less self-fertile and self-pollination can occur ahead of cross pollination. The seeds ripen and leave the capsule 3-4 weeks after the petals fall. On average, one capsule will produce 1,360 seeds, which can lay dormant in the soil for up to 40 years in undisturbed soil. Prior to the use of herbicides, those fields planted with cereal crops were often well populated with poppies (see also Folklore). This was particularly the case in north Norfolk where it became known as 'Poppy Land' during the Victorian period.



Folklore

Most people know of the poppy's connection with Armistice Day. This association grew from the WWI battlefields in France, where the fighting churned up the soil and brought thousands of dormant poppy seeds to the surface and decorated the land where so many had died. The association with death in the battlefield predates WWI, as it was said that the poppy grew where soldiers died at the Battle of Waterloo. In other parts of the world, poppies have more positive connotations. In China, it is believed to be lucky to smell the scent of the flower three times a day and in Turkey, they symbolise the promise of health and peace.

In rural areas within the UK, the agricultural community believed that it was unlucky to pick the poppy flowers. This could trigger thunderstorms or those picking the flowers could be struck by lightning. Moreover, those collecting the flowers might also become blind, develop a 'blinding headache' or even develop warts.

Folk Medicine

This particular species does not contain the same elements as its cousin, the opium poppy, but it does include the alkaloid called Rhoeadine which is a mild sedative. During the Mediaeval period, herbalists would often make a mixture of poppy syrup and give it to those unable to sleep through the night due to a migraine or head injury.

17th Century physicians made a syrup from the petals which was given to ease the pain associated with pleurisy and other chest and throat infections. This was made commercially and prescribed by doctors as a cure for coughs until the mid 20th century. Modern herbalists still use a similar syrup to treat throat infections and insomnia. The practice of chewing the seeds to ease toothache, earache and insomnia originated in the agricultural community and saw a significant revival during WWII within the army of Land Girls across the UK.

*Please note, readers should take advice from a qualified doctor or herbalist before using plants as a cure for ailments.