



INFORMATION NOTES

Papaver somniferum

The Opium Poppy

Cwsglys



The name

The generic name for poppies - *papaver* - is explained in the *Flora Medica* as having links with the Celtic word *papa* or *pap* - the soft baby food in which poppy seeds were mixed to encourage infant slumber. The word *somniferum* means 'causing sleep'.

Origins of the plant

The opium poppy is an annual plant which originated from Asia and has been cultivated on a large scale there and in Europe for many centuries. The oldest reference to it is found in Mesopotamia in the Assyrian Herbal of 2000 BC. It is thought that the legionnaires brought back seeds in their clothes, on the hooves of their horses and in the fodder for their animals. The developing road networks with their newly-turned verges provided an ideal seed bed and the plants quickly spread throughout the country. The plant is mentioned in the early herbals of Gerard and Parkinson who mentioned many forms being found in gardens in Britain. The Arabs referred to it as *Abou-el-noum* – the father of sleep- and in about 800 BC Hippocrates, the Greek Physician, referred to it as 'poppy-wine' and noted its effects.

The plant and its constituents

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The foliage is an attractive grey-green.

The large flowers vary in colour from white, mauve and red to almost black. There are double and fringed forms, mentioned by Parkinson in the 17th century.

The immature seed capsules have latex containing the crude drug – opium – consisting of about twenty alkaloids: the most important of which are the narcotics **morphine** and **codeine**.

Uses

- **Medicinal:** It is used for inducing sleep, as a painkiller and prior to anaesthetics when it is used by surgeons to cause a stupor in the patient.
- **Ornamental:** It is often self-sown in gardens and comes in varying colour forms. The flowers wilt very soon after cutting so are of no use for floristry. However, the dried heads are frequently used by flower arrangers.
- **Culinary:** The seeds may be used whole on bread or cakes and may be ground into oils for cooking. A mash of the seeds is used for cattle and poultry.
- **Folklore:** One of many tales concerning this plant is that according to the ancient Greeks the poppy was created by the God of Sleep to help Ceres who was in despair having been unable to recover her daughter who had been abducted by Pluto. As a result she was neglecting her duties as the Goddess of Crops. After her refreshing poppy-induced sleep the corn grew to a full harvest.

The plant has a history of hope and despair, being used and abused by man over centuries to this present day.

This information sheet was produced in May 2007 by Mary Wallis, a volunteer at Cowbridge Physic Garden.

Further information: The information in this leaflet came from a range of sources, including the internet. The main publications used were:

Poppies: The Poppy Family in the Wild and in Cultivation. Christopher Grey-Wilson, London: B. T. Batsford Limited, 1993.,

Plants from the Past. David Stuart & James Sutherland, New York: Viking, 1987.

The Origin of Garden Plants. John Fisher, London: Constable, 1982.

Flora of the British Isles. A.R.Clapham, T.G.Tutin & F.E.Warburg, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952.