

“Strangers in the Garden: The Secret Lives of Our Favorite Flowers” by Andrew Smith

This book deals with only 10 flowers that are very familiar to us but gives a lot of information on each that is unfamiliar to us. The 10 flowers are chrysanthemum, clematis, crocus, dahlia, geranium, iris, lilac, peony, rhododendron, and tulip.

Chrysanthemum cinerariifolium is also known as pyrethrum which was used as an insecticide in Persia for centuries. It is said to have been rediscovered by a resourceful German woman living in Dubrovnik. She threw a bouquet of these flowers into a corner and noticed several weeks later that there were a lot of dead insects surrounding the dried out flowers. She investigated the insecticidal properties and began to manufacture pyrethrum as a commercial product.

Clematis: In England clematis is sometimes called hedge feathers, evocative of its fluffy seed heads that cover hedges in the winter.

Crocus: In Ireland crocus is traditionally a St. Valentine’s flower. It blooms early to greet the saint on his day, February 14.

Dahlia: In the time of Josephine, a dahlia tuber, if found, could be exchanged for a substantial diamond.

Geranium: A large part of the distilled essence of this plant is bought by pharmaceutical companies who use the constituent known as geranol as a bactericide.

Iris: As well as her duties as messenger of the gods, Iris was also responsible for leading the souls of dead women to the Elysian Fields, a Greek version of heaven.

Lilac: The blossoms of gnarled but sturdy bushes, some of the first in North America, continue to perfume the air more than 350 years after they were planted by French Jesuit missionaries.

Peony: It is thought that the Romans distributed the European peony as their empire spread west and north from the plant’s native home in southern and eastern Europe.

Rhododendron: On being pursued by hostile Tibetans, George Forrest, the plant collector, wrote: “At the end of eight days I had ceased to care whether I lived or died: my feet were swollen out of all shape, my hands and face torn with thorns, and my whole person caked with mud. “

Tulip: The flower beds of Ahmed III of Turkey were said to contain half a million tulip bulbs. Tulip parties in spring -time Turkey were enlivened by the soprano voices of eunuch gardeners, accompanied by the song of flocks of caged birds. Just one interesting fact on each of the 10 flowers highlighted in this book, which is a quick and delightful read. This book is available for loan from the SSGC library.

Sharon Lawson