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PHOTO BY John Jons

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The range of human sentiments is expressed in one form or another by these fragile blooms and as a psychologist has aptly noted "Flowers are a perfect replica of human life." It's the delicate, subtle meanings given to

flowers that elicit emotion in the receiver.

The language of flowers has been around for centuries and even has its own special terminology known as floriography. Writings of the ancient Greeks, Romans, Egyptians and Chinese all included flower and plant symbolism. Meanings were probably passed orally through a largely illiterate audience.

Flower language was a flourishing art in the Middle Ages. It enabled a couple to express themselves without writing or speaking (one could be overheard and letters intercepted) in the presence of peers and chaperons. Since these courtships often took place over very long periods of time, the chance of someone noticing and interpreting correctly any particular flower in the exchange

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was slight.

Patterned to fit the ideals of courtly love, flower language allowed intentions to be declared, refusals and acceptances to be made, assignations arranged, and lovers dismissed. Flowers sent messages depending on context, accompanying flowers, and how they were delivered.

The 1800s seem to have been the heyday of flower symbolism. During Victorian times many small colorful handbooks were produced to guide the giver and recipient as to the meanings. Unfortunately, depending on the culture and the author, not all of the books agreed on meanings. Even today different cultures assign different messages to the same flower. One would only hope that each party was literally on the same page when it came to the interpretations.

Today flowers are still an important part of our anniversaries, birthdays, weddings, funerals, holidays and ceremonies although we may not know their true meaning. Wedding bouquets often include ivy that symbolizes fidelity. If you are looking for new ways of saying I love you, consider a bouquet of these flowers: forget-me-nots (true love); red tulips (perfect love); red rose (desire and love); amaryllis (pride, splendid beauty); coreopsis (love at first sight);

phlox (our hearts are united); gardenia (I love you in secret); gladiolus (you pierce my heart); lily of the valley (let's make up) and violet (I return your love).

If you're the bargain hunter type, then the hyacinth is the flower of choice as it can mean games, play or forgive me. I guess this is the perfect flower for a gentleman to give to a lady as it pretty well covers all the bases and provides a good form of positive "relationship insurance" for the male gender although I have not yet run that by Dr. Phil. Let's face it, it's a given that men probably need to be forgiven for something at any given moment (I'll probably get some amens from the feminine gender on this).

Whatever its origin, the rose is undeniably the best-known symbol of love and beauty. It is common knowledge that red roses mean I love you. For those with deep pockets or in the dog house, a dozen roses will convey the ultimate statement. On the other hand, a single rose reflects eloquent simplicity and single-minded of emotion—this approach also comes in handy when credit cards have been maxed out.

Lesser known nuances of meaning are attached to different colors and types of roses so it's worthwhile to get the definitions straight. Red and white

together mean unity, pink means grace and gentility, and yellow symbolizes joy. If you want to stir things up a bit, send orange or coral roses to speak your desire.

The custom of exchanging flowers may have less to do with romance and chivalry than with anxiety. For the shy or uncertain, handing over a bouquet of flowers is an easy way to express sentiment. But matters can become complicated here as how the flowers were presented and the condition of the flowers was also important.

Flower symbolism has a few inherent problems. It did not take a genius to figure out that wilted flowers are not a good thing. Or it could have just meant a slow messenger or that the delivery route taken included being caught in a traffic gridlock on the Gulf Freeway.

The language or symbolism of flowers can be confusing for the unobservant. On the other hand, should the complexity of communications by floral selection become too daunting on an occasion, be assured that the language or symbolism of a new Jaguar or BMW is always clear, universal and appreciated!