



Flowers speak many languages

By Arthur O. Tucker

*Ring around the rosies,
A pocket full of posies.
Ashes, ashes,
We all fall down.*

This nursery rhyme first appeared in print in 1881, but a widespread popular belief today dates it much earlier from the times of the Bubonic plagues. "Rosies" supposedly referred to the red rash from the plague, ringed slightly. The "posies" were herbs and flowers carried as a bouquet called a "tussie-mussie" (an English word which dates back to 1440) to sweeten the air from the stench of thousands of dead bodies.

"Ashes," often rendered as "at-choo," referred to the sneezing of the victims close to death. Nice theory but little to support it! However, we do know that tussie-mussies, pomanders and fragrant sachets were carried to ward off the "miasma," or stench of disease before the link was made with bacteria.

The Victorians used these myths and other poems and stories to create a "language of flowers." Long before text messaging, young lovers corresponded in secret code under the mystified eyes of their parents. Usually the young man started the conversation by sending a bouquet, along

Garden Tales



Submitted photo

A tussie-mussie is a small circular nosegay of flowers and herbs designed to carry a special message in the language of flowers.

with a book to interpret the message. Messages were sent back and forth and could become quite torrid! While we no longer practice this language of flowers, the symbolism has survived in wedding bouquets.

When my wife and I were married in 1971, I made a "tussie mussie," that my wife carried as her wedding bouquet with the symbolism of the Victorians.

Later contact with Geraldine Laufer, public relations manager

at the Atlanta Botanical Gardens and author of the leading book on these tussie mussies, allowed me to purchase silver tussie mussie holders that our two daughters used in their weddings in 2006 and 2008.

Here is the list of plants and their meanings that my wife and our daughters carried; some of the symbolism dates back to the Middle Ages, some even to the Romans and Greeks (I used variegated selections whenever possible for contrast):

Myrtle (*Myrtus communis*) for wedded bliss,

Daisies (*Leucanthemum vulgare*) for innocence,

Roses (*Rosa* sp.) for beauty, love, and unity,

Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) for love,

Rose geranium (*Pelargonium 'Graveolens'*) for kindness,

Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) for remembrance, and

Ivy (*Hedera* spp.) for God.

Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 302-857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the Herbarium, and call 302-857-6408 (Dr. Arthur Tucker) for more information about this article.