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Valentine’s Day is now the No. 1 holiday for florists. Pondering this fact, I have many
questions. When did it become a tradition
to give flowers to your beloved on Valen-
tine’s Day? Today, about 42% of the flowers
on Valentine’s Day are red roses, 29% roses
of other colors. Why? Was there a St. Val-
etine, and why do we associate him with
love and roses?

First, St. Valentine! Of the St. Valentine,
whose feast is on Feb. 14, nothing is known
about him except for his name and that he
was buried at the Via Flaminia north of
Rome on Feb. 14. It is not known if the feast
of Feb. 14 celebrates one or more saints
of the same name. We do have a record,
though, of the establishment of the feast of
St. Valentine in 496 by Pope Gelasius I, but
whether St. Valentine was a priest, bishop,
or martyr (or all three) is unknown.

“The Legenda Aurea,” or “Golden Leg-
end,” of Jacobus de Voragine, written ca.
1260, gives a brief synopsis of the life of St.
Valentine, which now has become legend.
Supposedly Valentine was a Roman priest
martyred during the reign of Claudius II
(Claudius Gothicus). He was arrested
and imprisoned after violating a prohibi-
tion against marrying couples and otherwise
aiding the persecuted Christians. While
in jail, however, Valentine fell in love with
the jailer’s daughter, and before he was
beheaded, he gave the girl a note and one
red rose.

During the Victorian era, floral sym-
bolism was very popular among young lovers.
They could send messages using different
flowers to stand for different meanings.
right under their parents’ noses (the Victo-
rian method of youths texting, I guess).

“The Florist’s Manual” (1833) relates
the story that the rose was sacred to Venus,
and while the flower was originally white,
Venus became wounded by its thorns, and
the rose turned red from the blood.

According to the “Flora’s Lexicon
(1870), roses themselves meant “Beauty,”
while a rosebud meant “a young girl.” “Flora’s
Dictionary” (1831) says that a red rose
bud meant “You are young and beautiful,”
while a full-blown red rose meant “beau-
ty.” Today, red roses have come to mean “I
love you,” the ultimate symbol of romantic
love.

Fortunately for my wallet, my wife does
not like roses but, instead, daisies. While
roses escalate from about $2 to $12.20 per
stem just before Feb. 14, daisies, which
universally symbolize “Innocence,” remain
around the same price.

If you want to break the trend of red
roses on Valentine’s Day, consider sending
your beloved the floral symbolism from
“Flora’s Lexicon” (along with a card ex-
plaining your thoughtful choices, i.e., im-
plying the time that you invested to show
your love and this wasn’t just something
that you grabbed on your way home on
Feb. 14 at the grocery store)

| Boxwood = Constancy |
| China Aster = Variety of Charms |
| Chrysanthemum = Cheerfulness |
| Daisy = Innocence |
| Holly = Foresight |
| Ivy = Friendship |
| Lily = Purity and Modesty |
| Rosemary = Your Presence Revives Me |

On the campus of Delaware State Uni-
versity, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is
Delaware’s center for research, education,
and outreach about plant identifications,
locations, and uses. Call 302-857-6432 (Dr.
Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the Her-
barium, and call 302-857-6408 (Dr. Arthur
Tucker) for more information about this
article.

Roses have traditionally been associated with love and are a natural for Val-
entine’s Day.