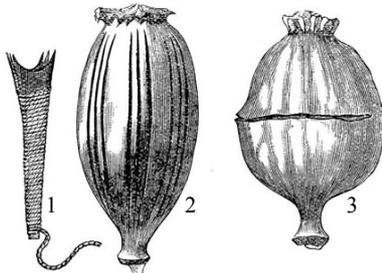


# Poppy

Last Monday, November 11<sup>th</sup>, Armistice Day, when walking down the Mall, I noticed a few people wearing red poppies in remembrance of the Allied soldiers who fell during World War 1. This blood red poppy, also known as Flanders, corn or field poppy, thrives in fresh and frequently turned soil, a sad reminder for mankind why the plants flourished in the battlefields where the ground was always turned and churned by artillery shells and shrapnel exposing the seeds to the light they needed to germinate. This same red poppy also flowers in Turkey in early spring, as it did in 1915, when the ANZACS landed in Gallipoli. However, in Australia, single red poppies are not usually worn on Anzac Day, sprigs of rosemary are more of the tradition; wreaths of poppies are usually placed at memorials, they belong more to November 11<sup>th</sup>, Remembrance Day.

Poppies plants belong to the genus *Papaver* of the family *Papaveraceae*. There are many species, well over 100, including the Iceland poppy, Oriental poppy, Californian poppy and the infamous Opium poppy, to name just a few. They are very attractive plants, hardy, frost tolerant, and easy to grow. They do particularly well in disturbed soil where the seeds may lay dormant for years till the soil is disturbed, and then they shoot up and bloom! The single, double or semi double tissue paper-like nodding flowers turn upward as they open on long, hairy stalks, blooming in almost any color, some with markings, from crimson to lilac, white, bright yellow or soft pink. There are two layers, the outer layer of two sepals drop off as the bud opens, the inner layer has 4, sometimes 5 or 6 petals and there are many stamens in several whorls around a single pistil. After flowering, the ovary develops into a capsular fruit with hundreds of tiny kidney-shaped seeds inside, ready to escape with the slightest breeze!

Poppies have a long history. In Greek mythology, the red poppy (*Papaver Rhoeas*) was associated with Demeter, goddess of fertility and agriculture. People believed they would get a bountiful crop if poppies grew in their field, hence the name 'field' poppy or 'corn' poppy (the name 'corn' was derived from 'korn', the Greek word for grain). Later, when these poppies flourished in the battlefield of Flanders during and after the First World War, the red poppy became associated with bloodshed, war and remembrance. With the exception of the Opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum*), grown only by license to produce seeds for culinary use and opium for medicinal use, poppies are cultivated as garden ornamentals as well as for the cut flower trade.



1. Instrument for making incisions
2. Vertical incisions
3. Horizontal incisions

Opium poppies are large - some are double formed - with frilly blooms in an attractive range of colours. The Sumerians called the flower 'Hul Gil', the 'flower of joy'. Opium is the exuded sap from small incisions made in the unripe seed capsules. This milky sap is collected when it is hardened and may be refined to make morphine and heroin. Then the plants are let go to form their seed-filled pods, which will be harvested when the seeds are ripe and before the pods burst open. Surprisingly, the ripe seeds of the opium poppy and the oil extracted from them contain no narcotic alkaloids (some authorities claim they contain negligible harmless amounts).



Milky sap, opium in its crudest form

Medicinally, the opium poppy is valuable for its painkilling, sedative properties. It contains around 25 different alkaloids, notably morphine and codeine, the two powerful painkillers that are widely used in medicine. During the Middle Ages, as an anaesthetic aid, a 'soporific' sponge impregnated with an infusion of poppy, mandrake, hemlock and ivy was held under the patient's nostrils during surgery. Sadly, this beautiful 'flower of joy', so useful to the human race for thousands of years, has now become a social outcast as the misuse of it has caused so much human misery. Originally used as a medicine for relieving pain and calming nerves; then refined to make morphine, then further refined into different forms of heroin, the mind-altering attributes of opium began to be abused and became a threat to mankind. These days, a small amount of domestic poppy cultivation in private gardens as ornamental plants is usually not subject to legal controls but large-scale plantations are under strict government supervision in most countries.

In the home kitchen, the slate blue kidney-shaped (yes, they are definitely kidney-shaped) poppy seeds make a flavoursome topping for baked goods such as breads, cakes and biscuits. The seeds of the White Persian cultivar, smaller and off-white in colour, are often used to thicken sauces and curries in India. Some 'trendy' restaurants serve poppy seed sprouts in their gourmet salads! (ordinary garden poppy sprouts or opium poppy sprouts, how does one tell them apart?). Poppy seed oil is highly esteemed, particularly in France, where they call it 'olivette' and use it as a substitute for olive oil in cooking. Another oil product - further refined and not edible - is used for artist's paint.