

BERRIES AS SYMBOLS AND IN FOLKLORE

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Berries often are used to symbolize many different things in literature, art, mythology, and everyday life. It has been thought that the red color of many berries symbolizes life or the blood of mythical creatures. Some of these symbols are positive and uplifting while others are downright scary. What's the folklore and symbolism behind the berries you grow? You might be shocked, intrigued, or have known all along. Go ahead, test your knowledge.

Blackberries have multiple meanings across religious, ethnic and mythological realms. They have been used in Christian art to symbolize spiritual neglect or ignorance. Mid-Mediterranean folklore claims that Christ's Crown of Thorns was made of blackberry runners. The deep color of the berries represents Christ's blood. A legend also exists where the blackberry was once beautiful, but was cursed by Lucifer when he fell into the bush when forced out of heaven. Every September 30th, with the ripening and darkening of the berries, he is thought to re-enter them.

Some folklore associates the blackberry with bad omens. European stories have claimed they are death fruits with ties to Wicca. They can also symbolize sorrow. In an old proverb they signify haste. A man is so excited to pick the berries that he jumps into the bush and the thorns cause him to lose his eyesight. He regains it, however, upon jumping back out of the bush. Greek mythology contains a legend similar to this. When Bellerophon, a mortal, tries to ride Pegasus to Olympus, he falls and becomes blind and injured upon landing in a thorny bush. This is his punishment for trying to take the power of the gods. Therefore, the fruit also symbolizes arrogance.

Elderberries can also be associated with bad omens. Pagan mythology states that all trees have spirits. Those of the elderberry happen to be extremely mean. The destruction of an elder tree would anger the spirits. Burning the elderwood caused evil to come and sleeping under an elder tree would cause dreams of death.

In Victorian flower language, however, an elderberry branch signifies remorse and the blossom: sorrow or zeal. The Christian belief coincides with this theme of sorrow and remorse. It is believed that Judas hung himself from an elder tree. Also, Central Europeans believe that the cross was made of elderwood.

Cranberries also have folklore surrounding them. There are two possible reasons for the common naming of cranberries. Some believe that the name came from folklore that claimed cranes liked them. Others link this naming to the pilgrims of Massachusetts because they believed the blossoms of the berries were shaped like the head of a crane.



Figure 1 Floating Cranberries waiting to be harvested.

Although there is no record that cranberries were eaten at the first Thanksgiving, they are often associated with this holiday and symbolize the “earth’s abundance.” It would have been interesting had these berries been shared at the first thanksgiving, however, because in Victorian flower language, the cranberry blossom signifies that the receiver extend kindness to the giver. The cranberry is also seen as a democratic. In England wealthy people pair it with delectable Venison, but poorer people are also able to enjoy it.

Gooseberries are also associated with a wide range of meanings. Often, when British children ask where babies come from, they are told that they can be found “under a gooseberry bush.” This agrees with the Victorian flower meaning of the blossom: anticipation.

Many phrases have developed over the years which mention gooseberries. In the newspaper business the phrase “great gooseberry season” is used to describe a period where there isn’t much headline news so tales such as the largest gooseberry are published instead. The phrase “playing gooseberry” signifies the third person and possible chaperone of a group where the other two people are dating. The phrase “going gooseberrying” involves stealing clothes that are hanging to dry.



Figure 2 Gooseberries

Currant flowers suggest that the receiver pleased the giver. They were also thought to have health benefits because quinsy was cured with black currants.

The discovery of raspberries is tied to Greek legend. According to this myth, raspberries were discovered while the Olympian gods were searching for berries on Mount Ida. This agrees with their Latin name *Rubus idaeus* which means “bramble bush (of) Ida.”

Raspberries are seen as a symbol of kindness in Christian art. The red juice is thought of as blood which runs through the heart, which is also believed to be the place where kindness originates. Their delicate state in transport has led them to symbolize fragility as well. A tribe in the Philippines also believes that raspberry canes, when hung outside a house, protect the family inside from any souls that try to enter by catching them.

Figure 3 Raspberries



Raspberries are also thought to have many medicinal benefits. Many of these are associated around childbirth and pregnancy. The berries and leaves contain many minerals such as iron, phosphorus, potassium, and magnesium which help enrich the blood by carrying iron from parts of the body such as the liver, spleen, and bone marrow to reproductive organs. English herbalists believed that pregnant women that drank raspberry tea would not experience problems during. Cherokee women drank raspberry juice during labor believing the same thing. Native Americans also believed that it would help with nausea felt during pregnancy. Gargling with the juice was believed to help relieve sore throats. Also, rubbing joints with the canes of the fruit is thought to ease pain.

The strawberry is a berry that is attached to many positive things through symbolism and folklore. The

flowers and berries together symbolize righteousness and spiritual merit in Christian art. The structure of the leaves, being trifoliate, represents the trinity. Pagan tradition echoes this in that the three leaves are thought to represent the three-fold Earth or Mother Goddess. In Victorian flower language, the berry symbolizes perfection and “sweetness in life and character.” It also represents modesty because the berries are often found under the leaves.

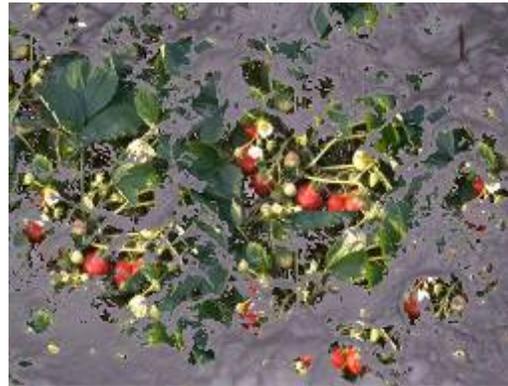


Figure 4 Strawberries under snow

This description of strawberries agrees with that presented in a Slovakian version of the Cinderella story called “Strawberries in Winter.” In this story a beautiful girl whose father dies is left to live with her step-mother and step-sister and do all of the housework. Meanwhile, her step-sister just has to meet with prospective husbands. The sheer beauty of the “Cinderella”, however, is enough to distract them. The step-sister and mother realize this and begin sending her on what seem to be impossible missions. She is asked to gather violets, strawberries, and apples in the middle of the winter. They do this in hopes that she will freeze outside and not come home. Each time she becomes extremely cold she happens upon the council of the seasons and asks if she can warm herself by their fire. They consent and help her to gather whatever she needs to return home. On the third outing she comes home with only two apples. The step-mother and step-sister devour them. Wanting more, they decide to go out and search for some. They too run into the council of seasons, but warm themselves in the fire without permission and are rude to the members of the council. Knowing who these individuals must be, January sends out a storm of snow and ice, and they never return. This shows that it is better to be like the beautiful sister and the strawberries: modest and “sweet in life and character.”

In mythology, Strawberries are connected to the Norse goddess of love, Freyja. Also, a Norse legend exists where the spirits of children enter the afterlife by hiding in strawberries that are taken to heaven by Frigga, Oden’s wife. This may be related to the Native American view that wild berries are “a special gift of Creation” to children and women. Many Native Americans believe that during menstruation and pregnancy a woman’s body becomes very toxic. Since they view strawberries and their leaves as blood purifiers and builders, laxatives, diuretics, and astringents, they can be used to cleanse the woman’s body during menstruation and after childbirth.



Berries in folklore and throughout history have had many different meanings. Some are positive and some are not. Now, hopefully you have a bit more knowledge of the possible symbolism behind the berries you grow. If not, at least you can pick the perfect blossom to tell a loved one just how you feel in Victorian flower language.

Figure 5 **Pink Panda Strawberry**

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(Images courtesy of Dr. Marvin P. Pritts. Some have been altered using Photoshop.)