Memories of Flowers

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Our flower project started with a simple activity... I took in some daisies and
dandelions that I picked in the park and we made daisy chains. We all
remembered doing this, but somehow it seemed easier with smaller fingers!
We also recalled picking the petals from the flowers and reciting "he loves me,
he loves me not" until the final petal revealed the answer.
We also sang along to Daisy Daisy.

He loves me,
he loves me not...

Sue wearing a daisy chain crown and bracelet

Shirley making a daisy chain
Greta as a child picking bluebells in 1941 and with the watercolour she painted of bluebell woods years later.
We began to fill in our flower sheets with information about ourselves and finding out the flowers associated with our birth month, their meaning, and our favourites. Three of us were born in May so shared the Lily of the Valley. Shirley said she liked Lily of the valley but had always associated bluebells with her birthday.

Freda was born in February so had Violet as her flower. Dressed all in blue and with blue eyes she said her favourite colour was blue. She remembered seeing violets growing in the woods and recently her son has moved near woodland where he took her to see them.

Sue was born in November and was disappointed that her flower is the Chrysanthemum which she has never liked. We discussed how they were in every garden in the 50's and 60's in lots of different colours which are maybe considered a bit gaudy today, although they can look stunning in the right setting. Currently they have made a come-back, and in a new colour of green, which looks very modern with white flowers in a vase. They are often stylised as big flowers which are fashionable as wallpaper.

Sue brought in a piece of Sanderson wallpaper that she had in her house in the 70's.
“Living in Holland as a child I remember walking with my mum along endless canals with windmills in the far distance. The verges were filled with flowers such as Cuckoo Flower, Cow Parsley and Buttercups all begging to be picked, but never lasting long enough until we got home. My dad worked in the fields getting in the hay and my mum would take me to bring his lunch. The whole field would be cut for hay, but the edge close to the canals would be filled with flowers.

We moved to a country estate owned by a Lord and Lady bordering on some woods where they used to go hunting, which in Spring were filled with Lily of the Valley. We used to pick them and fill all the vases and tumblers we could find, I remember they had a really heavy scent.

My dad was the gardener and was told to plant a few thousand daffodils. My brother and I had to help and we had a system where my dad would dig the hole, we would put in the bulbs and my dad would fill the hole again.

As an adult I was disappointed that I was never able to keep my Lily of the Valley alive when I had my own garden.”

Yvonne
May Day Celebrations

“I attended Bexhill Down Infant’s School, where May Day was celebrated every year. On a weekday afternoon, parents (usually mothers as fathers would have been unlikely to be able to take time off work), would take their seats to watch the proceedings.

The May Queen and King, regally attired wearing their crowns, would sit on chairs perched on top of school desks, to oversee the celebrations. We would perform various dances around the May Pole sited in the middle of the playground. I am unable to remember details of these dances, except that we spent a great deal of time practising beforehand and I have no idea of how the music was provided.

All the children would be dressed up as something appropriate, the photo of me as a daisy was taken in 1952. My mother made the outfit using crepe paper and I remember on another occasion being dressed a daffodil.

After all the dancing there was tea and homemade cakes and the children had orange squash to drink.”

Sue Cummins
Yvonne grew up in Holland so had different views about flowers. She remembers thinking British bouquets of flowers looked quite ungainly, with each type of flower laid on top of each other, rather than bunched.

She said in England the bride chooses her flowers but in Holland it is the groom’s choice, and the bride doesn’t know what there will be until the wedding day, which led to some discussion!

Yvonne told the sad story that her new father-in-law died two days before her wedding and her wedding bouquet was recycled and retied with ribbons and placed on his coffin, she was disappointed as she had wanted to keep it.

For her wedding at Easter in 1995 she made crepe paper flowers to decorate the tables. Each table had a different colour scheme and they were sewn together to make garlands. The top table had pink, red and white flowers, the cake table had blue and white and each table had different colours.

Having had the idea and after making a few flowers, she and her mother ended up making about 900 of them!

After the wedding, they were stored in a big cardboard box in the attic. A few years later, they had so many wasps that they called out the pest control. The officer showed them the wasps nest - all in the colours of the wedding flowers that had been chewed up to create their nest!
Step-by-step narcissus and daffodil

Step 4 To strengthen stem and attach sheath
First cut sheath in brown crêpe paper using pattern 3. Place the flower stem inside a drinking straw. The stem can now be trimmed, if desired.

Press the straw flat up one side. Wind a strip of green crêpe paper down the stem, starting at the flower base and covering the binding wire. Attach the sheath about 3.5cm (1¼in.) down the stem. Continue binding the stem to cover it completely. Bend the flower head forward away from the sheath.

Step 5 To make the leaf
Leaves are optional for use in arrangements. Cut two shapes for each leaf in green crêpe paper, using pattern 4. Cut a piece of No. 3 wire the same length as the leaf and glue between the two leaf shapes.

Daffodil

The daffodil is made in the same way as the narcissus except that all the petals and the flower center are yellow. The daffodil flower center is about 1cm (½in.) longer and a small amount wider than that of the narcissus, and the edge of the flower center should not be painted with red ink.

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I wandered lonely as a cloud That floats on high o'er vales and hills. When all at once I saw a crowd, A host of golden daffodils; Beside the lake, beneath the trees, Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine And twinkle in the Milky Way. They stretched in never-ending line Along the margin of a bay; Ten thousand saw I at a glance, Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced, but they Out-did the sparkling waves in glee: A poet could not but be gay, In such a jocund company; I gazed—and gazed—but little thought What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie In vacant or in pensive mood, They flash upon that inward eye Which is the bliss of solitude, And then my heart with pleasure fills, And dances with the daffodils.

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William Wordsworth 1815
Yvonne showed us how to make the flowers from crepe paper. She cut out the paper to size and cleverly washed out the dye to make more realistic flower colours. We learnt how to curl and wrap the paper to form petals and to attach them to a stick with wire. We ended up with quite a big bunch that we kept on top of the piano.

Earlier we had made daffodils from crepe paper which by contrast didn’t look quite so realistic but had the characteristic shape of the flowers.

We spent a whole morning talking about daffodils and the famous poem Daffodils by Wordsworth.

At the end of the session, we noticed for the first time that the piano at the Centre had marquetry daffodils as decoration in the wood.
We planted some sunflowers from a pack of mixed seed. They came in a tray with their own little plastic cover to act like a greenhouse. Freda did a good job of planting them and the heat in the Centre certainly got them going - the next week we were all amazed to see lots of plants about 6” tall, all a bit gangly and obviously looking for light! Most of these didn’t make it over the next week, but we were able to rescue some plants and Greta took them home and re-potted them. Her green fingers certainly seemed to do the trick as she brought them back the next week duly thinned out and in separate pots and we each took one home to see who could grow the tallest.

I planted mine outside and made space for giant flowers... I remember as a teenager, my parents looked after a neighbour’s parrot while they were on holiday and they tossed the old seeds out for the wild birds. It was a complete surprise to discover a rampant sunflower growing at the side of the lawn, which grew to over 6 feet tall! We take it for granted to eat seeds and nuts now as snacks, which are even considered power foods. I remember eating sunflower seeds as a child in the 60’s enjoying sifting through the mixed bag bought for my hamster!

Despite lovingly watering and feeding the sunflowers outside my door, I was disappointed that rapid growth didn’t seem to be taking place, but rather the plants were squat, with several flowers developing and the big leaves were making a tasty meal for caterpillars! These were duly picked off and relocated, but the plants didn’t get any taller. As the flowers began to open I realised this was a different variety of sunflower, called Teddy Bear with smaller pom-pom style yellow flowers without the usual black centre. All the tall variety had peaked too soon...
We began to notice flowers all around the Centre - pink flowers growing up on the roof which we could see through the glass roof, and the elderflower tree through the windows. It was a pity that below the windows and only seen from outside where fewer people walked past, a few favourites were blossoming, including bright orange marigolds and wall flowers. Briefly several golden dandelions appeared before their time was up and they turned into ‘clocks’. We managed to bring some inside and told the time quite accurately by blowing on the seeds.
Looking around the Centre there were flowers everywhere, the chairs and cushions, the art on the walls including cross stitched flowers in the embroidery of a peacock and in the kitchen area an old tin of Roses and pictures of flowers on the herbal teas. There were even tiny flowers on the window ledges of the cuckoo clock!
Weddings were a good starting point for discussion. Shirley brought in wedding pictures of herself, her two daughters and her son. Her daughter Gail had worked as a florist so she had spectacular flowers in her bouquet, including large pink lilies. They had to get up at 5am and put on heaters to make sure the flowers were fully open for the big day.

At her son’s wedding her daughter-in-law carried a huge bouquet of red carnations which was apparently the same as her mother had carried for her wedding in the 1940’s. It was so heavy it had to be put on a special stand.
Sue A told us her second wedding had been a hippy affair and the costs were kept to a minimum. She had bare feet and flowers woven into her hair, drove herself there in her own sports car and was told at the ceremony that she had passed her Advanced Driving test. Her friend sang as her present and helped with the decorations and as Sue was a singer herself she also sang. The reception was held on Hastings Pier and the Bonfire Society drummed them in. Sue had a shop on the pier at the time called “Simply Susans” selling candles and giftware as well as a coffee shop. In the front pew of the church, Sue placed a red rose for each person who had passed away and so was not able to be there. Afterwards they held a short service on the pier and the flowers were tossed in to the sea.

Freda described her own wedding, as only one photo was taken during the war. Her friend who was a seamstress had made her a suit specially. She didn’t have a bouquet as flowers were not available. Her husband had taken embarkation leave having been out in Africa. He had been spraying against malaria and had to take tablets which had turned his skin yellow. Freda said the most important thing about the wedding was that they could be together. Times were hard and for the honeymoon they had gone to stay with a family friend.
“My parents were married in 1942 and my mother is wearing a spray of Orange Blossom which she pressed and kept along with a piece of material from her dress. No white dresses were available and without this fabric I would never have realised what colours there were in the dress.

Fifty years later on their 50th wedding anniversary she is wearing another flowery dress which is not dissimilar!"

Alex
Karen came to the centre and showed us her collection of vintage fabrics and covers. She enjoys making quilts using embroidery from old tablecloths and napkins. We were all impressed by how lovely they looked in their new form, thinking it was a good way to re-use things which are now often kept hidden away in drawers and cupboards and never see the light of day. We all remembered the linen cloths that came pre-printed with blue outline of flowers and scenes to embroider. What a lot of work went into something as taken for granted as a tray cloth.

We made some bunting, cutting out triangles from left over floral fabrics which Karen sewed together on to ribbon so we could hang it in the centre. More than once I heard the phrase “It’s a sin to cut up this fabric...” which really summed up how valuable everything was in the past. These were off-cuts from other projects which would otherwise be stored in an attic, hopefully their new lease of life cheered up the corner of the room for all to enjoy and the “sin” was justified!
Karen also sewed up the edges of some gingham cotton material to make lavender bags. We drew out an image of some lavender flowers on one side and the initial letter of our name on the other. We then set about embroidering these using stranded embroidery cotton.

After discussion we used three threads and shared how to make French knots and do various stitches. When finished we filled them with lovely smelling dried lavender flowers and finished off the bags with a ribbon bow.

Another song came to mind whilst making the lavender bags and we sang a couple of rounds of Lavender Blue Dilly Dilly. Despite their use to make drawers smell nice and under pillows to help you get to sleep, we managed to stay awake long enough to make them!
Greta and Betty brought in dresses to show us, with floral patterns. Greta had made her flower patterned cotton sun dress in the early 60's. She also brought in a dress she had made later which had almost photographic pictures of flowers all over it, which must have been quite a novelty. Amazingly she could still fit into the dresses and we all urged her to wear them as they still looked in fashion today. Most weeks someone was wearing a floral print or fabric with flower detail.
One of the most successful projects was making flowers from coloured felt and buttons. Everyone managed to cut out different layers of coloured felt finished off with a button. We glued pins on the back and all made individual brooches which we wore several times.
Much of the chat was about gardens and gardening. Even though this was now a difficult activity to take part in, the group were still interested in what was growing. We talked about what was in flower along the seafront, and witnessed the season change through hyacinths to tulips to pansies and petunias.

Shirley brought in two photos taken in the Old Town, first covered in snow and then later when they had recovered and were in full bloom. Several people had been on a group trip to Michelham Priory and had enjoyed walking in the gardens there.

Blanche showed us her picture of flowers in a garden which she had coloured in with bright felt tip pens.
It seems flowers and floral decorations are everywhere, whether natural or highly stylised… and never seem to lose their popularity. From wallpaper to note paper, serviettes, dinner sets and jewellery, they can be found in every home.

We talked about how we had grown them, picked them, pressed them, arranged them, painted them and sewn them. We remembered being given them and giving them to others and the pleasure that they had provided.

The only thing that was not mentioned was how shy girls used to be called wallflowers… perhaps because during this project nobody was left at the side of the room and all enjoyed the gathering.

Alex Leadbeater 2010