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**Botanicum: Welcome to the Museum**

by **Kathy Willis**

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## Cultivated Flowers

People realised a long time ago that plants could be cultivated to help cure illnesses. Medieval doctors believed that plants healed the bit of the body they most looked like: black-eyed daisies were thought to be good for disorders of the eye and broccoli was used to treat diseases of the lungs. Many plants are still cultivated for their medicinal properties (though with a rather greater reliance on scientific evidence). For example, opium poppies are used to produce two vital painkillers, morphine and codeine. Unfortunately, they are also cultivated to produce heroin, a treacherously addictive drug. This handsome poppy may be the world's most contentious flower.

Other flowers are cultivated for food. The sunflower gives us tasty seeds which, as well as being eaten whole, can be pressed to release a versatile and flavoursome oil, used in salads, cooking, making margarine and much more thanks to their high proportion of unsaturated fatty acids. Sunflower oil has other uses too, including as biofuel (fuel made from plants or other organic matter as opposed to fossil fuels such as oil and coal), in soap making, and as a drying oil for paint. The seed cases can also be put to good use after the oil has been extracted, for example mixed with soyabean meal to make a protein-rich livestock food. Ground sunflower seeds have also long been used as an alternative to wheat flour in making bread, for example by Native American peoples.

Some flowers are grown for their smell. Roses and lavender were first introduced into northern Europe by the Romans. Both are used in the perfume industry – lavender was first cultivated as a scent by the ancient Greeks. Less well-known is that the iris is also grown for its scent. To make this, an iris's rooting structure – known as a rhizome – needs to be stored for three years. When taken out of storage and squeezed, it exudes a distinctive, butter-coloured oil called orris, which smells of violets. Orris also has the unusual property of making other scents smell stronger.

Many plants, of course, are grown simply because they look nice. Flowers have been collected from all over the world and cultivated because people enjoy transplanting a dash of colour or a hint of the exotic into a garden. Hellebores are from the Balkans, the Middle East and China. They have become a favourite with gardeners for their palette of colours, and because they flower in both winter and spring.

### Key to plate

1: Hellebore or Lenten rose  
*Helleborus sp.* hybrid  
Height: 30cm

2: Common sunflower  
*Helianthus annuus*  
Height: up to 3m  
Flower diameter: 10–50cm

3: Opium poppy  
*Papaver somniferum*  
Height: up to 60cm  
Seed heads

4: Bearded iris 'Old Black Magic'  
*Iris x germanica* hybrid  
Height: 60–90cm



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