

Tale from the Garden

Are you like me, when I see a Snapdragon, I can't resist squeezing the side of the flower to make the 'mouth' open, then snap shut when released! It's the child in me! The botanical name of the flower is 'Antirrhinum majus'. In Greek, the word 'anti' means "like," while 'rrhinum' means "snout" (rhin = nose). The flower looks like the jaws and snout of a dragon. The flowers were originally white or purple, but today come in all sorts of colours and sizes from 6 inches to 4 feet tall. There is a lovely display in the garden at the side of The Mill on Springfield – unfortunately just out of arms reach!



Origin

Snapdragons originated in the Mediterranean region and southern Europe, and have spread throughout the world. They were brought to America when colonists began to populate the states and planted them in gardens in almost every state. Snapdragons are easy to grow and were given the title of Flower of the Year in 1994 by the US National Garden Bureau.

Snapdragons have been grown since the rise of the Roman Empire. The Romans and Greeks thought snapdragons had the power to protect them from witchcraft. Descorides, the Greek physician, wrote that protection would be given to the person that wore snapdragons around their neck. In the medieval period, snapdragons were thought to be the guardians of European castles and were planted near the gates. Women boiled snapdragons and applied the resulting infusion to their faces to keep them beautiful and restore youth!

Folklore

Early German society thought a bunch of snapdragons hung near a baby would keep the baby from being afraid of evil spirits. In Russia, snapdragons were believed to boost the body's energy and oil was made from the seeds and used like butter.

1700s and 1800s

Thomas Jefferson noted that he grew snapdragons in his garden in the late 1700s. In the Victorian era, a bouquet of snapdragons usually meant a proposal was coming soon. Hiding a snapdragon in the clothing was supposed to make a person fascinating, gracious, alluring & cordial. In the Victorian Language of Flowers, Snapdragons either meant deception, suspicion & mystery, or graciousness.

1900s to Today

Snapdragons were considered one of the most popular cut flowers during the 1950s. Breeding started then and produced several popular varieties of the flower. The variety called 'Rocket' won six All American Silver Awards in Horticulture in the late 1960s. Another type of snapdragon was developed in the 1960s and it did not have the snout and jaw form. Instead it looked like butterfly wings and was called "Bright Butterflies." In the early 1970s yet another form was developed called "Madame Butterfly" and looked similar to the butterfly type but had an extra petal in the middle and was called the double azalea form. Today we have the three types of snapdragon including the dragon jaws, butterflies and double azalea, all of which are still very popular in gardens all over the world.

John Henry Newman was the greatest of all the English churchmen of the last two hundred years. He was born in London in 1801. Venerated throughout the world, Newman's many gifts, and his life of exemplary holiness, continue to fascinate. Famous in his own lifetime as a writer, thinker, preacher and poet, he is seen today as a prophet and a saint. As well as a theologian, a teacher & an educationalist, he was also a priest & a pastor. He visited the sick, the imprisoned, & those human qualities of care & friendship are as relevant now as they were in his own time. He worked in prisons, with people in hospitals, & in schools. He was a friend to everybody on the streets, to people in high places & power, with the poor, the rich, the famous, the unknown. Few have achieved his clarity of vision over the fundamentals of the Christian Faith, or have been able to express these timeless truths so clearly, to share them so lucidly and to continue to inspire succeeding generations.

"Snapdragon in the Wall" by Joyce Sugg is a highly readable account of his life, written with a freshness and immediacy that brings us close to the story of this remarkable man - a very English saint.

The title of the book refers to John Henry Newman equating himself to the Snapdragon, when referring to his time at Trinity College, Oxford:

"Trinity had never been unkind to me. There used to be much snap-dragon growing on the walls opposite my freshman's rooms there, and I had for years taken it as the emblem of my own perpetual residence even unto death in my University."

It was Newman's desire to live and die at Oxford, in the simplicity of the life of a scholar, caring for the souls of his students. He thought for a time he would, since he was appointed a tutor at Oriel in 1826, a year before he wrote these verses:

Pleasure, wealth, birth, knowledge, power, These have each an emblem flower;

So for me alone remains, Lowly thought and cheerful pains.

Be it mine to set restraint, On roving wish and selfish plaint;

And for man's drear haunts to leave, Dewy morn and balmy eve.

Be it mine the barren stone, To deck with green life not its own.

So to soften and to grace, Of human works the rugged face.

Mine, the Unseen to display, In the crowded public way,

Where life's busy arts combine, To shut out the Hand Divine.

The final 8 line stanza of the poem contains the solution to the "riddle"

Ah! no more a scentless flower, By approving Heaven's high power,

Suddenly my leaves exhale, Fragrance of the Syrian gale.

Ah! 'tis timely comfort given, By the answering breath of Heaven!

May it be! then well might I, In College cloister live and die.

Just as all flowers were symbols or emblems of something else – the Snapdragon is the emblem of himself. The riddle is solved.

Here the barren stone wall which Newman stared at from his College room is decked by the Snapdragon, giving it green life - that is, "gracing" the stone, and softening the "rugged face" of the "human works," the man-made walls. But then Newman has the Snapdragon claim something quite startling – the Snapdragon, while growing in stone walls, is displaying the "Unseen" to anyone who is in a "crowded public way". A busy life might keep a person from thinking of God. This is an important line. The "Unseen" that the Snapdragon is revealing, is God, or God's will.

But what of the "fragrance of the Syrian gale"? The Snapdragon releases its scent with a passing breeze, which for Newman expresses both humility and the Unseen - an act of submission by nature which will give evidence by fragrance to the Unseen, another metaphor for what John Henry desired for his life, through the emblem of the Snapdragon. We know Newman did not stay at Oxford; God had other plans. Later developments would take him from this life, to the greater glory of God and the world.

So will our busy lives crowd out our thoughts of God ... or will we soften the face of our man-made walls with the greenery & fragrance of God's will ... to the greater glory?

A healthy Christian community is one in which people know that they are loved, visitors are welcome and young and old alike are valued and feel safe. The care that we offer, both at

times of crisis and in everyday life is an active proclamation of God's love in Christ and for all the world.

Within the life of the Church the role of the Pastoral Visitor is one of the most significant. Its importance has several facets, because the visitor is part of the structure of the Church which enables members and adherents to sense that they belong to a Christian community. Hence, part of the responsibility is to be a channel of communication, linking people together and keeping them in touch with what is happening in the life of the Church. The visitor is also significant in providing pastoral care to one or more individuals (their pastoral group), by demonstrating an interest in their lives and providing support and encouragement at particular times of need. As a member of a wider team, visitors can offer not just their own time, skills and resources, but those of the Church as a body. The visitor also has a role to play in assisting others to grow in their faith and discipleship, through listening to their experience, discussing concerns and providing encouragement.

As an expression of our Christian faith we look after one another, ensuring that our meetings are safe places, in which we can all grow in our faith. John Wesley, one of the founders of the Methodist Movement, believed very strongly that contemporary Christianity must reflect the early church that we read of in the Acts of the Apostles, a close community, caring for one another, bearing each other's burdens and holding each other in accountability and prayer.

As our Pastoral Team meet together in the coming week, may we remember that Jesus calls all of us to care for and to be "present" to others. Pastoral Care is a ministry of "presence", based on faith and prayer to provide support and love to those who are in need. Pastoral Care is a journey shared in a concerned relationship, and the journey is equally significant in the lives of both travellers and to God.