

Tale from the Garden

Advent begins with the Sunday nearest November 30th and takes in four Sundays before Christmas. It marks the beginning of the Christian year. Advent in Latin means "coming." It's a time of preparations and an expectation of Christmas with all that the holiday symbolically celebrates. In many denominations, flowers are removed totally from the church and instead are replaced by green foliage. There are, however, always exceptions to the rule. Most notably, evergreens are used in the creation of wreaths as decorations for the church during Advent.

When creating wreaths out of pine, there is symbolism in the greens being laid flat and in a circle. Evergreens stand for life and, of course, the circle stands for the never-ending, eternal aspect of life.

You could also make arrangements out of boxwood and holly and put them into vases. Holly during the Advent season symbolizes the crown of thorns.

Topiaries made out of greens, especially boxwood, are another beautiful addition to the altar. The sculptural appearance of a boxwood topiary works well because altar arrangements are usually viewed from a distance. A boxwood topiary with ivy trailing off horizontally makes a strong but elegant and understated statement.

Many denominations use poinsettias in the church during Advent. They are usually red or white. The "Advent Poinsettia" is deep red with rich green foliage. Poinsettias are used in remembrance of others.

BLOOMING ADVENT

Countdown to Christmas with candles and flowers ...

It's pretty dark, isn't it? Candles and flowers are great sources of illumination in the days running up to Christmas. Flickering flames can be just nice and cosy or can consciously bring you into an Advent mood. Whatever the underlying motivation, flowers make the candlelight even more special.

Purple flowers also make an excellent combination with your Advent candleholder, particularly because purple becomes even more intense when it's lit by candlelight. Purple flowers that your florist is bound to stock during Advent are Chrysanthemums, Lisianthus, Orchids & Amaryllis. You will traditionally see purple - the colour of penance and repentance - in churches during this period.

LISIANTHUS

The beautiful Lisianthus is the flower of the moment and there is no wonder why it is seen in many bouquets and floral displays.



The Lisianthus is versatile. It comes in white, green, blue, pink, lilac, purple and salmon. Some flowers even have petals with multiple colours. The petals are very soft and delicate, so need to be handled with care.

The Lisianthus may appear soft and sweet, but the flower has powerful meanings of gratitude, appreciation and charisma. They're a fitting addition in a thank-you bouquet, or as a present to a friend you admire.

Lisianthus is native to North America, where it grows in desert riverbeds and on prairies. In the states of Texas, Nebraska, Nevada and Colorado they call this plant the 'Prairie Gentian' or the Texas Bluebell.

The modern Lisianthus was created in Japan by flower breeders in the 1930s. They developed the wild prairie gentian into the cut flower that we know and love today. Lisianthus flowers have long stems with many flowers in calming, soft colours. It is similar to Roses both with its buds and flowers which start to bloom from early summer. Much like Gladiolus, they start to flower at the bottom of the stem and open up in succession from bottom to top. The flowers on each stem bloom for up to four weeks which is a lot of flowering throughout the summer months.

With so many wonderful colours to choose from and because they are so easy to grow, you could pick any to suit your garden borders or as a cut flower for the vase. The variety of colours is always growing as well, as breeders discover more for you to enjoy.

Why not try Lisianthus 'summer blue rose' which has a bluish colour mixed with slightly grey/purple. If pale pink is more your thing 'arena baby pink' has gorgeous delicate pink petals. For a more deep pop to your garden, try 'arena purple' or perhaps 'croma silky white' is more to your taste.

How did Lisianthus get its name?

The name comes from the Greek word for dissolution 'lysis' and flower 'anthos'. So 'lisianthus' in Greek basically means dissolving flowers. It's scientific name, 'eustoma', also comes from the ancient Greek language where 'eu' means beautiful and 'stoma' means mouth or a mouth-like shape.

Fun facts about lisianthus!

- The Lisianthus is the birth flower for Sagittarius, the ninth sign of the zodiac, considered as governing the period from about November 22 to about December 21. No wonder it's a fitting flower for the weeks up to Christmas.
- Because the name is a little tricky to pronounce, they're sometimes shortened to 'lizzies'.
- They're usually mistaken for roses, tulips and peonies.
- They're also known as a bitter flower because they had a very bitter taste when used in medicine.
- Lisianthus flowers come in single and double forms, with double being the most popular.
- Purple Lisianthus flowers really make a statement in any room and symbolise beauty, nobility and royalty. No wonder it's a fitting flower for the Advent wreath.

The Lighting of the Advent Wreath each Sunday reminds me of the power of light. Here's a little folk tale which epitomises this glorious illumination.

'There was a gentleman who had three sons and he decided rather than the usual tradition of giving his inheritance to the oldest son, he decided he would give the inheritance to the one who was perhaps the most intelligent, the cleverest, the wisest. He decided to test them and gave them each a penny. He told them to go to market and purchase something with that penny – obviously in the olden days when pennies were still worth something – that would fill his barn. The first son comes back from the market the next day and his purchase is as many feathers as a penny would buy him. He tosses them into the barn in the hope that they are going to fill the barn but of course they don't, there's not enough to fill the barn. The second son sees the first son make the mistake and thinks that he could do better than that. He goes off to market and comes back with a bail of straw. For a penny! But the straw didn't fill the barn either! The youngest son had watched the two older sons and he had an idea. He went off to market the following week and he came back with a candle. He then took the candle into the barn, lit the candle and the light filled the barn. And, of course, he was the one who received the inheritance.

That's just a simple story but light is so powerful, it can fill dark places.

We often begin Christmas with the reading from John 1 v5 The Word Became Flesh 'The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.'

The darkness can't comprehend the light, it doesn't understand how the light works. I find that so encouraging at this time when perhaps there might be moments where we might

feel that the darkness is pushing in or things might be worrying us or that there are mounting pressures put upon us. Remember that the light, the light of Jesus who comes at Christmas time, overcomes the darkness. The way the candle lit up the gloom of the barn is a powerful image where we can see just what a difference light makes. I want to encourage you with that today because in the context of joy, the emotion we will hopefully all experience this Christmas time, walking closely with the Holy Spirit will help our joy be expressed & shared with others. Like the 'light shining in the darkness' (that is Jesus) the light of our joy then illuminates out of us and can impact the world around us. In the same way as Jesus' light shines, let your light shine before others. Allow joy to become that expression through you this Christmastime because I believe that it will make a difference in other people's lives. It will be like the light overcoming darkness.

In Matthew's Gospel, we read 'In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds & praise your Father in Heaven.' (Matthew 5 v16)

Let's be so full of joy this Christmas that we glorify our Father in Heaven & make a great difference in the lives of those around us. And we can begin by singing our faith.

Clare Stainsby set out to write a hymn that would be simple and memorable. Each verse of 'Light a candle in a darkened place' (Singing the Faith 174) ends with a celebratory cry, 'So let it burn'. Clare wanted to underline the idea that "this message we're sharing in Advent burns through everything we do". She speaks of "the flame of Christ that burns on to this day – what we're symbolising in the candle goes on and on".

The Advent Candle Song:

1. Light a candle in a darkened place,
In its flame see hope on every face,
Christ our Saviour will be born,
Heralding a brand new dawn,
So let it burn.
2. In the darkness, see the coming light,
Word of God speaks through the darkest night,
Keep a watch, the time is near,
Time for hope and not for fear,
So let it burn.
3. Stepping through each page of history,
Prophets contemplate this mystery,
Celebrate the coming King,
Words of joy and hope they bring,
So let it burn.
4. In the desert now the waiting's done,
Make things ready for your King, says John,
See, his glory is revealed,
And the hope for all is sealed,
So let it burn.
5. Mary found true favour with the Lord,
Yet she trembled at his strange reward,
Knew this was the special One,
Hope for many through God's Son,
So let it burn.
6. (to be sung on Christmas Day)
Do not fear, today I bring good cheer,
Jesus Christ, the Saviour now is here,
God has lit his flame of love,
Through his Son from heaven above.
So let it burn.