



# Flower Power

By Richard Mawrey



The soft energy of plants can be turned into a potent symbol of political authority.

Addressing the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom the other day, I was struck by the magnificence of the surroundings. The court sits in a somewhat undistinguished building of 1913 glowering at the Houses of Parliament across Parliament Square, and I had remembered it as a lacklustre criminal court and, before that, as the headquarters of Middlesex County Council. When the Supreme Court was created in 2009 to replace the House of Lords as the UK's highest court, the building was refitted, at vast expense, to be its new home. What particularly impressed me (other than the now world-famous insect brooches worn by Lady Hale, the Court's President) was the Court's logo. It appears, hugely, engraved on the wall over the judges' bench and is also woven into the magnificent double-room-height curtains and into the carpets.

The logo itself is a novelty. Traditionally courts in the UK carry on their business under the Royal Coat of Arms but, when the Supreme Court was created, it was felt that it should have its own symbol. How to devise it?

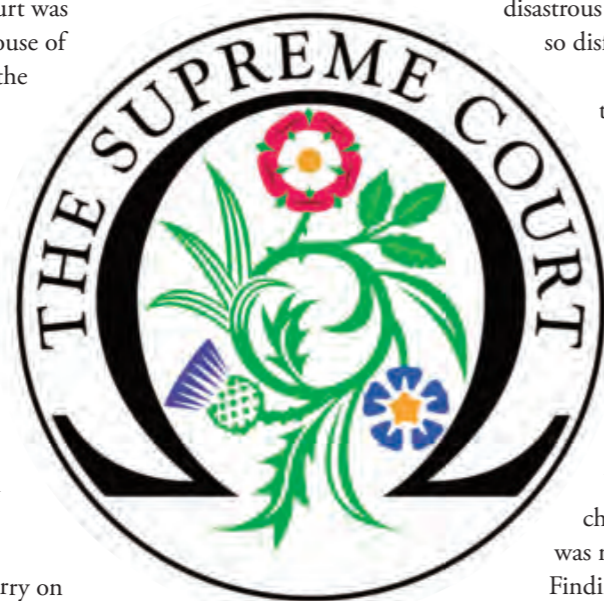
Because Scotland (as well as having an entirely different legal system from England) still boasts a court of heraldry, known as the Court of the Lord Lyon, its Herald Painter, Yvonne Holton, was commissioned to devise something appropriate. As will be seen, the logo aims to represent the four 'nations' of the United Kingdom – England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This set me wondering how and why nations and states, or provinces within nations, adopt floral or vegetable emblems.

The design of the Supreme Court logo involved choices. England is clearly represented by the rose which has been its unofficial emblem since the middle ages. The red rose is still

the symbol of English sporting teams. But the decision made here was to choose the Tudor Rose, a flower entirely unknown to botanical science, because it is itself a logo, half a millennium before the word. The Tudor Rose is a merger of the red rose of Lancaster with the white rose of York created when Henry VII of Lancaster married Elizabeth of York in 1486 to symbolise the end of the disastrous era of the Wars of the Roses which so disfigured the English 15th century.

Scotland's emblem is, of course, the thistle (*Onopordum acanthium*) which has been its national flower since the 13th century. The legend is that an invading Viking army, seeking to surprise the sleeping Scots, was approaching bare-foot to avoid noise, but was revealed in time when one of the men stepped on a thistle and yelled. When Scotland's premier order of chivalry was founded in 1687, it was named the Order of the Thistle.

Finding an emblem for Wales involved a starker choice, one between the leek (*Allium porrum*) and the daffodil (*Narcissus pseudonarcissus*). The leek, which was eventually chosen, is the more ancient symbol, indeed older than either the rose or the thistle. The legend is that, when about to engage in a battle (battles feature strongly in emblem stories) with the invading Anglo-Saxons, Wales's patron saint, St David (c.500-c.589) told the Welsh to wear a leek on their caps so as to be able to distinguish friend from foe in the fight. Lovers of Shakespeare's Henry V will recall a lot of rather heavy-handed humour involving Fluellin and his leek, the night before Agincourt. The daffodil is much more recent and its origins more obscure: it may indeed result from a simple confusion, as the words for leek and daffodil are the same in Welsh – 'Cenhinen' (Leek) and 'Cenhinen Pedr' (Daffodil).



Opposite page: France's fleur-de-lys (left); the Tudor rose (right) and the emblem of Britain's Supreme Court (centre).

Right: A Cedar of Lebanon and its stylised representation on that country's national flag.

Below: Canada chose a generic, all-purpose maple leaf.



Northern Ireland's emblem is, quite frankly, a fudge. The ancient Irish symbol is the shamrock (*Trifolium dubium*), but that was firmly appropriated by the Republic of Ireland when it became independent in 1922. The best that could be devised is the flower of the linen plant (flax – *Linum usitatissimum*) which refers to the fact that Belfast was for a long time the centre of the linen industry, and so flax is the fourth symbol on the Supreme Court logo.

Working this out led me to consider how plants had been chosen as other countries' symbols – and almost every nation has one. Indeed, in the USA and Australia, every individual state has its flower. Why do countries find it necessary, even important, to adopt some vegetable emblem which duly appears on the national flag? In some cases, the reason is obvious.

When Lebanon became an independent country in 1943, the choice of a national symbol was uncontroversial and the cedar of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani*) is the centrepiece of the Lebanese flag.

The Canadian Maple Leaf represents not only a statement of national identity but a fusion of the British and French strains of Canadian history. It started life as an emblem of the French settlers in Quebec in the 18th century and by the mid-19th century had been incorporated into the coats-of-arms of both Quebec and Ontario. It began to appear on coins and soldiers' badges, and in patriotic songs.



Eventually the Canadian Parliament adopted it as the national flag in 1965 and it remains an instantly recognisable symbol of Canada today. The maple selected is, deliberately, of no individual species but a generic, all-purpose, maple leaf.

Japan goes a different route. The chrysanthemum is not only the national flower but the name of the imperial throne and 'the Chrysanthemum Throne' has, in its turn become the metaphor for the Japanese monarchy itself.

Though most national symbols are fairly obvious, even banal, others have a history which is more nuanced. Insofar as France has a national flower it is the lily, the fleur-de-lys. This is, patently, a stylised version of a flower and it is disputed whether the original flower was really a lily at all or was a species of iris, possibly *Iris pseudacorus*. But the name lily is now firmly established.

Its use in France is very ancient: in the middle ages, there was a legend that a lily had been delivered by an angel to Clovis (c.466-511) the first King of France (at that time King of the Franks) who united the Frankish peoples and converted both himself and his subjects to Christianity (hence the angel). The fleur-de-lys, with its triple flower, has been variously interpreted as representing either the Holy Trinity or the three Estates of the Realm: the clergy, nobility and commons.

The fleur-de-lys, however, was essentially an attribute of French royalty. It formed part of the royal coats of arms and the flags of the King's armies. When England's Edward III mounted a claim to the French throne at the beginning of what became the Hundred Years War, he incorporated the fleur-de-lys into the English royal arms where it remained until 1802 when, under the Treaty of Amiens, the United Kingdom agreed to drop the monarch's claim to the French throne on the (somewhat specious) pretext that, as the French had abolished their monarchy, George III couldn't very well be King of France.

*“How and why do nations and states, or provinces within nations, adopt floral or vegetable emblems?”*

Since the French Revolution, the association of the fleur-de-lys with monarchy has not sat well with the French and as a national emblem it is now rather downplayed. French teams take the field with the symbol of the French fighting cockerel. Being a devotee of the fleur-de-lys (it is the symbol of both my house at school and my Oxford college, Magdalen), I find this a pity.

How do flowers get adopted as national symbols? Sometimes, as with the UK's 'nations' they are simply traditional. By contrast, if the flower or tree is going to be officially adopted or to appear on a flag, particularly a national flag, some legislative or executive act is required.

Unless you were American, you would probably not guess that the rose is the national flower of the USA. Although roses are indigenous to North America – indeed the early settlers in Virginia sent back specimens of what became known as *Rosa virginiana* to England – one might have expected something a little more typically American: a Californian redwood perhaps or a cornus. But the rose is the USA's national flower by Presidential Proclamation, no less.

Following a Senate Joint Resolution, on 20 November 1986 President Ronald Reagan issued Proclamation 5574, designating the rose as the national flower of the United States. The citation speaks of the rose as having a special place in the hearts of Americans. A rose named for George Washington's mother (Mary Ball Washington) is still much



grown, and roses are found in all 50 states. The White House itself has a famous Rose Garden – think Presidential press conferences. So the rose is now the national flower of the USA, joining those of Bulgaria, Chile, England, Haiti and the Maldives.

Israel, by contrast, put the choice directly to the people and, as might be expected with that fiercely democratic (and, as Israelis would concede, disputant) people, controversy has swayed this way and that. In 2007, an online poll organised by the Israeli website Ynet produced a narrow majority for the cyclamen (*Cyclamen persicum*) as the national flower over the anemone (*Anemone coronaria*). The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel, however, was not going to take this defeat lying down and, having (unlike others who might be named) no rooted objections to a Second Referendum, persuaded Ynet to conduct an even larger poll in 2013, to coincide with the SPNI's 60th anniversary. This time the anemone triumphed with 28% of the poll, with the cyclamen driven into second place (23%) and the purple iris (*Iris versicolor*, which can be consoled as being the state flower of Tennessee) a poor third (12%). So 'as of this writing' (as *Time* magazine used to say), the anemone is Israel's national flower but nothing is set (or planted) in stone.

Although President Reagan's Proclamation speaks movingly of the rose as a symbol of peace and love, national flowers are by no means solely associated with national harmony. The last half century has seen a plethora of

revolutions bearing floral names, usually but not inevitably the national flower of the country concerned. Even Reagan's rose is not immune. The former Soviet republic of Georgia, which obtained its independence after the fall of communism in the late 1980s, had retained its Soviet-style political system under President (and former Soviet foreign minister) Eduard Shevardnadze. The Rose Revolution ('vardebis revolutsia' in Georgian) was a peaceful movement which succeeded in ousting Shevardnadze and establishing a more democratic and pro-western state. The rose is not Georgia's national flower but the revolution takes its name from the roses brandished by the protesters who stormed the Parliament in Tbilisi in November 2003.

Some revolutions concentrate on the edible. In 2009 Moldova's Grape Revolution (Moldova is a wine-producing country), again against communist-style government, was a dismal flop, but Kyrgyzstan's Melon Revolution of 2010 managed to oust another dictatorial president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, though the reason for the melons is obscure. The charmingly named Coconut Revolution of 1998 saw the island of Bougainville obtain a measure of autonomy from the government of Papua New Guinea.

Revolutions named for national flowers include Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution of 2011, which is important as the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring. The jasmine is Tunisia's emblem, despite the fact that it is not native to Tunisia but was introduced by Andalusians who settled there in the 16th century following the expulsion of Muslims from Spain in the 1490s. Unlike much of the rest of the Arab Spring, the Jasmine Revolution not only ousted President

Ben Ali but managed to install a measure of liberal democracy, albeit punctuated by appalling acts of Islamic terrorism.

The national flower of Egypt since Pharaonic times has been the lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*), but the Lotus Revolution of 2011, also part of the Arab Spring, did Egypt no favours: the overthrow of army rule under President Hosni Mubarak led to rule by the Islamic fundamentalist Muslim

Brotherhood which, in turn, led back to army rule under President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi.

The only floral rebellion that can definitively be said to have ended happily is the Carnation Revolution, the oldest on the list. In April 1974, a military coup in Lisbon overthrew the dictatorship that had controlled Portugal since the 1920s: the military were soon joined by the civilian population and, within a remarkably short time, Portugal had established a democracy and liberated its colonial empire and, within 12 years, it was

admitted into the European Union. As with Georgia's roses, carnations were not the national flower (in Portugal it is lavender – *Lavendula spica*) but they were the symbol of the demonstrators and of the soldiers who put carnations in their rifle barrels.

National flowers and trees can be a vital part of a nation's cultural heritage, part of folk memory and visual association, but they can also be chosen or imposed by new nations seeking a national identity or by revolutionaries needing a symbol round which to unite. Surely, however, the symbols chosen in recent times will, eventually become as embedded in the national consciousness as the English rose or the Welsh leek. 🌸

*“You would probably not guess that the rose is the national flower of the USA.”*



*This page:* Edward III's arms (above); President Reagan designating the rose as the national flower of America (far left); the anemone is Israel's flower of choice (left).

*Opposite page:* Jasmine: the emblem of Tunisia; (right) a revolution named after the lotus, a flower associated with Egypt for millennia.

