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**Aphrodite and Adonis (detail)** Attic red figure lekythos, c. 410 BC, Louvre, Paris

# Blood to Flowers

The mythical origins of flowers and fruit.

Billy Kennedy plucks this story

Several flowers and a berry that are well known today gained their names from the tragic deaths of characters from myth. Most of them also got their red colour from the spilt blood of these tragic figures. The most famous of these was Adonis.

Adonis was the son of an incestuous relationship between Myrrha and her father Kinyras, king of the Assyrians. Because Myrrha did not honour the rites of Aphrodite, the goddess of love and desire, Aphrodite caused her to conceive an unnatural desire for her own father, Kinyras. With the help of her maid she arranged to secretly sleep with her father for twelve nights. When he lit a candle on the final night and discovered her identity he drew his sword to slay her, but she beseeched the gods for aid and they transformed her into the myrrh tree, which weeps precious sap to this day. It turns out that Myrrha was pregnant when she was transformed and nine months later the myrrh tree split open and Adonis emerged from it.

The handsome youth Adonis was so stunningly attractive that Aphrodite herself then fell completely in love with him and he, in turn, devoted himself to

her. However, because he did not honour the rites of Artemis, the goddess of animals and the hunt, Artemis sent a wild boar against him and it gored him to death in a bed of wild lettuce. From his spilt blood Aphrodite created the red anemone and also coloured the Gallic rose pink. The *Anemone coronaria* is a spring bulb with vivid red flowers. The seed of the plant is carried on the wind, hence the ancient Greek name for the flower was windflower, anemone, coming from *anemos* (ἄνεμος) the wind. The *Rosa gallica*, known to the Greeks as *rhodon* (ρόδον) was cultivated by both Greeks and Romans for its attractive pink flowers.

There is a curious footnote to this tale. The wild prickly lettuce, *Lactuca serriola* (Greek: *thridax*, θρίδαξ), was also cultivated by the ancient Greeks,



**Anemone coronaria or Windflower** (left) and **Gallic Rose**.

and the ball shaped lettuce of today, *Lactuca sativa*, is a derivative cultivar. However, due to the fact that Adonis died in a lettuce patch, the eating of too much lettuce came to be widely regarded by the Greeks as a cause of impotence. This was because Adonis was the beloved of Aphrodite and so his death was interpreted symbolically as the death of love.



**Wild Prickly Lettuce (*Lactuca serriola*)**

Next we move on to the tale of Krokos. Little is known about this handsome youth except that he was the much loved companion of the messenger god, Hermes. During a game of discus Hermes accidentally struck and killed Krokos. Overcome with grief and remorse Hermes transformed the body of the youth into the Saffron Crocus whose crimson coloured stigmas were coloured by Krokos' blood.

*Crocus Sativus* is a mauve coloured autumnal perennial. Each flower produces three vivid red stigmas that are harvested as the spice and dye, saffron. Currently saffron is the most expensive spice in the world and retails for around A\$130 per gram (one gram can be harvested from 150-175 plants).



**Saffron crocus (*Crocus sativus*) and dried Saffron stigmas**

Our next story is very similar to that of Krokos, involving as it does another handsome youth, the Spartan prince, Hyakinthos. In this case Hyakinthos was loved by two gods — Zephyros, god of the west wind, and Apollo, god of music and prophecy (and many other domains).

On one occasion when Apollo and Hyakinthos were playing discus together Zephyros became inflamed



**Zephyros and Hyakinthos (detail)** Attic red figure kylix by Douris, c. 490-480 BC, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts

with jealousy and used his windy powers to snatch up the disc thrown by Apollo and to redirect it to strike the head of Hyakinthos. From the blood of the dying prince Apollo caused the rocket larkspur to spring up. On its petals he inscribed the words 'ai ai', meaning 'alas, alas'.

There is, however, an alternate myth explaining the origin of this flower. It is said that during the Trojan War Odysseus and Ajax both desired to receive the arms of the dead hero, Achilles. When the arms were

awarded to Odysseus, Ajax went mad, buried the hilt of his sword in the ground and threw himself onto it. The larkspur flower then sprang from his blood and the inscription 'ai' on the petal in this case is the first two letters of his name in Greek, i.e. *Aias*. The Greeks know the flower as *Hyakinthos*, but in Latin the flower is known as *Delphinium ajacis*, i.e. the Delphinium of Ajax. The final myth is that of Pyramos and Thisbe. This young man and woman were neighbours in the city of Babylon and wanted to marry. Their parents were enemies, however, and so forbade the union. Desperate to be together, the two discovered that there was a crack in the common wall between their houses. By night they held whispered conversations through this aperture and flamed the fires of their passion. They then agreed to meet at night by a certain landmark where there grew a large mulberry tree, which until that time had snow



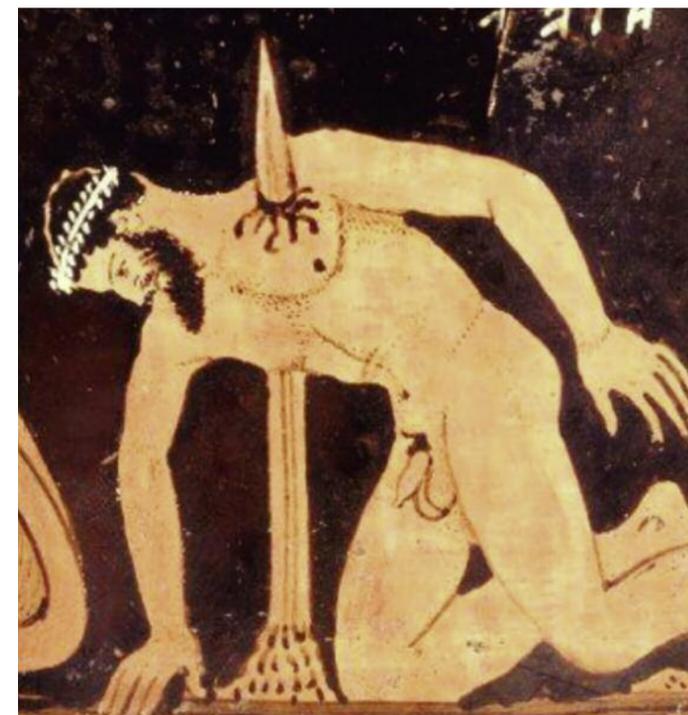
(left) **Rocket Larkspur (*Delphinium Ajacis*)** (right) **Black Mulberry (*morus nigra*)**

white berries. On the appointed night, Thisbe arrived first. While she was waiting she spied a lioness, fresh from the kill, and hid herself in a nearby cave, dropping her cloak as she fled. The lioness mouthed and tore the cloak before also departing. When Pyramos arrived on the scene he noted the heavy footprints of the great cat and the torn and bloodied cloak of his beloved. Assuming that he and his plan to meet were responsible for the poor girl's death he plunged his sword into his own belly. He ruptured an artery in doing so and his blood sprayed the white fruit of the tree a deep red while the roots of the tree also absorbed his ebbing life blood.

Returning to the scene, Thisbe noted the strangely coloured fruit and then the writhing body of her dying lover. Calling on the tree to honour their deaths by always bearing fruit of the new dark red colour, Thisbe then fell forward onto the sword herself and joined Pyramos in death. The gods honoured Thisbe's dying plea and the fruit of the black mulberry (*Morus nigra*, Greek: *moron*) has been black-red ever since.

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**Suicide of Ajax (detail)** Etrurian red figure calyx-krater, c. 400 BC, London, British Museum



**Deaths of Pyramos and Thisbe, House of Loreius Tiburtinus, Pompeii**

