

WILDFLOWERS OF TEXAS

LEGENDS & FOLKLORE Part I



Lady Bird Johnson

Wildflowercenter

*Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center
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WILDFLOWERS OF TEXAS

LEGENDS AND FOLKLORE

SUNFLOWER (*Helianthus annuus*) ASTERACEAE/SUNFLOWER FAMILY

The annual sunflower is very useful and Native Americans greatly valued it. They used for it medicines, fiber, cordage, and as a highly nutritious food for both humans and cattle. The seeds could be ground up and used to make bread. The shells were used to brew a pseudo-coffee.



The Incas believed that the sunflower was the physical manifestation of the Sun God on Earth.

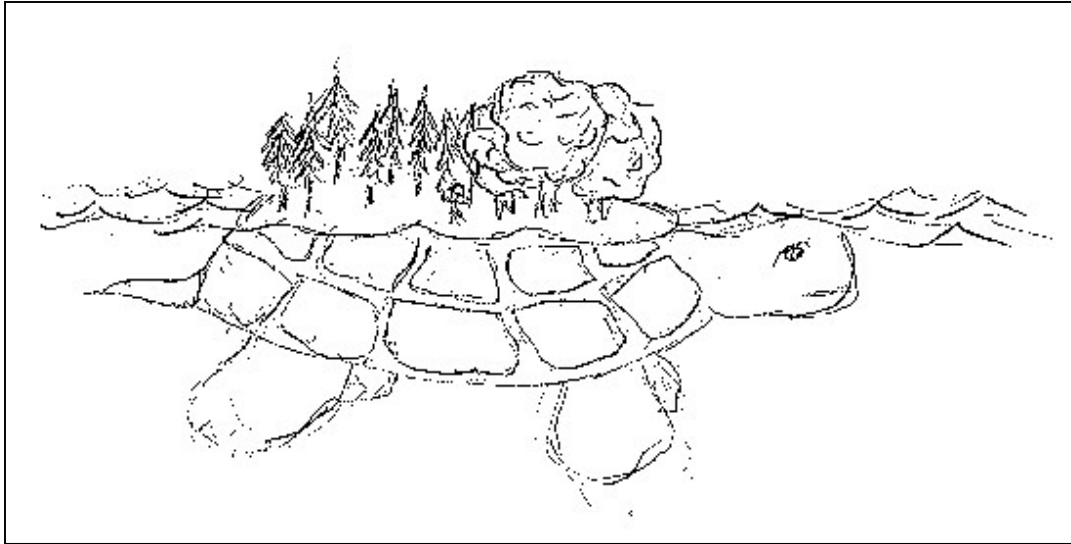
The plant is an important part of the Iroquois creation myth.

Iroquois Creation Myth (from: http://www.cs.williams.edu/~lindsey/myths/myths_12.html)

Long before the world was created there was an island, floating in the sky, upon which the Sky People lived. They lived quietly and happily. No one ever died, or was born, or experienced sadness. However, one day one of the Sky Women realized she was going to give birth to twins. She told her husband, who flew into a rage. In the center of the island there was a tree that gave light to the entire island, since the sun hadn't been created yet. He tore up this tree, creating a huge hole in the middle of the island. Curiously, the woman peered into the hole. Far below she could see the waters that covered the Earth. At that moment her husband pushed her. She fell through the hole, tumbling towards the waters below.

Water animals already existed on the Earth, so far below the floating island two birds saw the Sky Woman fall. Just before she reached the waters they caught her on their backs and brought her to the other animals. Determined to help the woman, they dove into the water to get mud from the bottom of the seas. One after another the animals tried and failed. Finally, Little Toad tried and when he reappeared his mouth was full of mud. The animals took it and spread it on the back of Big Turtle. The mud began to grow and grow and grow until it became the size of North America.

Then the woman stepped onto the land. She sprinkled dust into the air and created stars. Then she created the moon and sun.



The Sky Woman gave birth to twin sons. She named one Sapling. He grew to be kind and gentle. She named the other Flint and his heart was as cold as his name. They grew quickly and began filling the Earth with their creations.

Sapling created what is good. He made animals that are useful to humans. He made rivers that went two ways, and into these he put fish without bones. He made plants that people could eat easily. If he was able to do all the work himself there would be no suffering.

Flint destroyed much of Sapling's work and created all that is bad. He made the rivers flow only in one direction. He put bones in fish and thorns on berry bushes. He created Winter, but Sapling gave it life so that it could move to give way to Spring. He created monsters that his brother drove beneath the Earth.

Eventually Sapling and Flint decided to fight till one conquered the other. Neither was able to win at first, but finally Flint was beaten. Because he was a god Flint could not die, so he was forced to live on Big Turtle's back. Occasionally his anger is felt in the form of a volcano.

The Iroquois people hold a great respect for all animals. This is mirrored in their creation myth by the role the animals play. Without the animals' help, the Sky Woman may have sunk to the bottom of the sea and Earth may not have been created.

IRIS (*Iris* spp.)
IRIDACEAE/IRIS FAMILY

Iris is one of the oldest cultivated plants known, having been brought from Syria to Egypt by Thutmosis III (1501-1447 BC).

Named by the Greeks for the goddess of the rainbow, Iris, because the flowers came in so many different colors. One of Iris' duties was to lead the souls of women to the Elysian Fields after they died. So, Greeks often put iris flowers on the graves of their women in honor of the goddess.

The iris figured prominently in the history of France. The iris was used to symbolize French victories in war; Clovis I, the king of the Franks was the first to adopt the iris as his symbol of victory. As legend has it, during a great battle Clovis and his men found themselves trapped between the enemy and a river. Looking across the water, Clovis saw a yellow flower growing halfway across and realized that the river was shallow enough in that spot for his men to cross and escape to safety. The iris symbol was revived by Louis VII and was called the "flower of Louis", or fleur-de-lis.

Native Americans used iris roots to treat sores on their legs.



ASTER (*Aster* spp.)
ASTERACEAE/SUNFLOWER FAMILY

According to Greek legend, the aster was created when Virgo, looking down from heaven, cried and her tears mixed with stardust. As the dusty tears fell to Earth, they turned into asters.

A mish mash of asters was believed to cure the bite of a rabid dog (it had to have worked at least once!); the Shakers used it to clear their complexions and the Greeks used it to treat snake bites.



Asters are associated with elegance and daintiness and were used as symbols of love.

BLUE-EYED GRASS (*Sisyrinchium* spp.)
IRIDACEAE/IRIS FAMILY

Blue-eyed grass is not really a grass. It is actually one of the smallest members of the Iris Family! This plant is a good illustration of the pitfalls of learning only common names. If you look really closely, there is no blue eye. It is actually yellow!

The genus name, *Sisyrinchium*, means pig's snout. It describes the activities of pigs, who will root around in the plants trying to get to the tasty roots.



AGARITA (*Mahonia trifoliata*)
BERBERIDACEAE/BERBERIS FAMILY

This “pokey” evergreen shrub produces small, yellow flowers between February and April. The bees just love it, too! The red berries make a tasty jelly.

Some people call this plant the “babysitter bush” because small animals will place their babies beneath its prickly leaves while they forage for food. Predators won’t stick their faces into the shrubbery, and the babies are safe until their parents return.



ANEMONE, WINDFLOWER (*Anemone heterophylla*)
RANUNCULACEAE/BUTTERCUP OR CROWFOOT FAMILY

Anemones are one of the first flowers to bloom in the Spring. The genus name, *Anemone*, commemorates Anemos, the Greek god of the winds. This plant is a nice illustration of how different cultures interpret the same plants. Romans would pick the first anemones in the Spring while saying prayers. They believed that doing so would protect them from disease in the coming year.

In the Near East, people believed that the flowers would make them sick and ran by fields holding their breath. Quite a feat!



The Chinese call it the death plant and place them on the graves of their loved ones.

TEXAS BLUEBELLS (*Eustoma grandiflora*)
GENTIANACEAE/GENTIAN FAMILY

One of Mrs. Johnson’s favorite flowers, Texas bluebells have almost disappeared from the landscape. The family, Gentianaceae, was named for Gentius, king of Illyria. Gentius was known to use gentians medicinally. A Hungarian folk story says that gentians were named after King Ladislas whose people were enduring a terrible period of plague. He shot an arrow into the air, begging God to let it fall on a plant that would cure his people. The arrow landed on a gentian, which was used to treat the plague and save his people.



Pioneers added a little piece of gentian to gin or brandy to stimulate the appetite and aid in digestion.

TEXAS DANDELION (*Pyrrhopappus pauciflorus*)
ASTERACEAE/SUNFLOWER FAMILY

The young leaves of this plant were sometimes used as a potherb. They have to be parboiled to remove their bitterness. Very young leaves can be mixed in with salad greens.

An Indian legend tells the tale of a beautiful chieftan's daughter who fell in love with the Sun. Everyday, she would climb the hilltop and gaze at him as he made his way across the sky.

For many years, the young woman adored the Sun to no avail. He never noticed her. As time went on, the young woman grew to be a very old woman with long, gray hair. As she watched her beloved, her hair blew away on the wind. One day, she lay down on the hilltop and passed away.

Only then did the Sun notice her. He marveled at her devotion and, as a token of his esteem and admiration, he covered her body with small yellow flowers. Every year, these flowers track the Sun's progress across the sky until they grow old and their "hair" (seeds) drift away on the wind.



FOXGLOVE (*Penstemon cobaea*)
SCROPHULARIACEAE/FIGWORT FAMILY

Although a member of the same family, our foxglove is not the same species as the foxglove used to treat heart conditions (*Digitalis purpurea*). Sir Thomas Nuttall, a naturalist, first discovered this plant in Arkansas and named it after the Mexican genus *Cobaea* because they looked so similar.

The foxglove got its name from the ingenuity of a clever little fox. The little fox kept trying to get into the farmer's henhouse to steal eggs. But every time, he made so much noise, he woke up the hens that squawked so loud, it woke the farmer. He, of course, came out of the house with the shotgun blazing away.



Well, the fox was getting pretty tired of getting shot at and not getting at those yummy eggs. One night, as he lurked outside the henhouse, he noticed a plant with several flowers blooming. He looked long and hard at those flowers and got an idea. He picked four of the blooms and slipped one on each foot. He then crept silently up to the henhouse and was inside before he knew it. While inside, he collected enough eggs to satisfy his hunger and crept silently out the way he came.

As he ate the eggs in the safety of his den, he admired his new "gloves." And, that's how the foxglove got its name.

INDIAN BLANKET (*Gaillardia pulchella*)
ASTERACEAE/SUNFLOWER FAMILY

A wonderful Indian legend tells the story of a great weaver in a tribe of Plains Comanche. This man was a wonderful weaver and made beautiful robes, mats, and blankets. Everyone in the tribe had something that the weaver had made, and it was among their most prized possessions.



One day the weaver realized that his time on Earth was drawing to an end. So, he set out to make one last weaving. It would be his death blanket. The weaver worked for many weeks, gathering the plants to create his dyes, preparing the wool, setting up his loom, and, finally, weaving the blanket. Several months later, the blanket was complete. That night, the weaver died in his sleep.

Out of their great respect and love for the weaver, the tribe wrapped him in the blanket and placed him on the burial platform. When the Great Spirit came to take the weaver to heaven, he was awed by the beautiful blanket. He was also amazed at the love and respect the tribe held for the weaver. So, as a gift to the people of the tribe, the Great Spirit sends the colors of the weaver's last creation to Earth every Spring in the flowers of the Indian blanket.

GOLDENROD (*Solidago* spp.)
ASTERACEAE/SUNFLOWER FAMILY

This plant gets a bad rap because its showy flowers bloom at around the same time as ragweed. Ragweed produces very small inconspicuous flowers, each of which produces huge amounts of irritating pollen. Because people see the goldenrod flowers, they get blamed for making us feel bad.



Goldenrod was born when an incredibly old woman was trying to make her way through a dark and forbidding forest. As she walked, she asked each tree she passed to help. One by one, the trees refused. Halfway through the forest, she came across a small stick. The stick told her it would be happy to help her make her way through the forest.

The old woman picked up the stick and eventually came to the end of the forest. As she emerged from the shadow of the trees, she turned into a beautiful fairy princess. Turning to the lowly stick, she said, "For your kindness and help, I will grant you one wish." The stick thought for a moment and replied, "I would like to be loved by all the children of the world."

The fairy princess sprinkled gold dust on the stick and chanted a few words. Immediately the stick turned into the beautiful goldenrod and, to this day, is loved by all the children of the world.

WINECUP (*Callirhoe involucrata*)
MALVACEAE/MALLOW FAMILY

Native Americans used the sweet, starchy root as a food source. An Indian legend tells of the origin of the winecup. The old king was ill and many feared that he would die soon. The court physicians called the king's oldest son to his bedside.

As he wept at his father's bedside, the boy had a thought. He would dance the Dance of the Winecups as a final tribute for his father. As he balanced cups of wine on his open palms, the boy began to dance. He twirled faster and faster, caught up in the dance and his grief for his father. As he spun, drops of wine spilled on the dirt floor of his father's bedchamber. At last, the boy sank to his knees, exhausted.

The next morning, the boy returned to his father's bedside to find the old man eating and chatting with his advisors. The gods were so impressed with the boy's dance and love for his father that they granted him good health. And, on the floor, wherever the wine had been spilled, beautiful, cup-shaped wine-colored flowers had sprouted.



BUTTERFLYWEED (*Asclepias tuberosa*)
ASCLEPIDACEAE/BUTTERFLY WEED FAMILY

Butterflyweed is the larval host plant for Monarch butterflies. The butterflies lay their eggs on the foliage and, as the larvae hatch, they eat the leaves. The leaves contain an alkaloid compound that the butterfly larvae incorporate into their tissues. This makes the larvae taste nasty and discourages predators from eating them.

Adult Monarch butterflies retain the alkaloids that make them taste bad. In addition, their coloration sends a message to potential predators that they won't like what they are eating, and predators avoid them.

The pollination biology of this plant is very interesting. The flowers are highly modified with the pollen being held in a V-shaped structure. The pollen attaches to the legs of foraging insects and is later transferred to other flowers. Sometimes, though, the insect's leg gets caught in the V, trapping the insect.



INDIAN PAINTBRUSH (*Castilleja indivisa*)
SCROPHULARIACEAE/FIGWORT FAMILY

Paintbrushes are called hemi- or semi-parasitic plants. Their roots are not strong enough to absorb all the necessary water and dissolved minerals that the plants need on their own. So, paintbrush roots “buddy up” with the roots of other plants, most commonly bluebonnets and grasses. They then siphon off some of the water and dissolved minerals their “partner’s” roots are absorbing. This helps them get their daily allowance of water and minerals. Because they don’t kill their hosts when they do this, they are considered semi-parasitic.



An Indian legend tells the story of how paintbrushes came to bloom. There once was a young boy. He wanted more than anything to be a warrior. But, he was very small and couldn’t keep up with the bigger boys as they learned the skills necessary to become great fighters.

One day, as he sat outside the family’s tent feeling sorry for himself, his grandfather sat down beside him. “You know,” he said, “Not everyone is meant to be a warrior. You have other skills that make you special. You can draw and paint anything you see. That is your great gift.”

The little boy thought about that for a while and decided that his grandfather was right. From that day forward, he began to draw and paint all that he saw around him.

As a young man, the boy became obsessed with capturing the colors and beauty of the sunset. Although he tried very hard, the colors kept eluding him. One night, as he lay sleeping, an old man and beautiful young woman came to him in a dream. The woman was carrying a pure white deerskin. “This,” she said, “will be the canvas upon which you capture the beauty of the sunset.” And she laid it next to him. The old man leaned in close and whispered, “Go to the hill tomorrow evening and you will find all you need to capture the sunset.”

The next morning the young man awoke and waited all day for evening to come. As the sun began to set, he gathered up the deerskin, his paint, and brushes and made his way up to the top of the hill. When he arrived, he saw brushes of every color of the sunset. He sat down, spread his canvas out, and, as the sun began to set, and using the brushes he found, began to paint the sunset. As he worked, he tossed each brush aside. By the time the sun had set, he had his picture. Proudly, he carried it down to the camp and presented it as a gift to the tribe.

The next morning he awoke. As he walked about the camp, he looked to the hill where he had painted his masterpiece. There, everywhere he had tossed aside a brush, were flowers in every hue of the sunset. And, every Spring, the Great Spirit sends the colors of the sunset to remind us of the little boy who captured the sunset.

PASSIONFLOWER (*Passiflora* spp.)
PASSIFLORACEAE/PASSIONFLOWER FAMILY

Native Americans used almost all parts of the plant to treat different illnesses. It can, however, be very toxic if used improperly. Powdered root was used to treat cuts and wounds, earaches, and inflammations. It also supposedly had powers as an aphrodisiac. Modern research has shown that extracts can be mildly sedative, reduce blood pressure, and increase the respiratory rate.

Passionflower is the food plant of several butterfly larvae.



Named *flos passionis* or *flor de las cinco llagas* (flower of the five wounds) by the Jesuits, the passionflower is believed to be the flower that grew on the cross in a vision seen by St. Francis of Assisi. Each part is believed to represent the instruments of the Passion of Christ.

The five sepals and five petals together represent the 10 faithful apostles. Peter is left out because he denied the Lord, and Judas, because he betrayed Him. The fringed crown represents the crown of thorns.

The five stamens represent the five wounds Jesus suffered, one in each hand and foot and the one in his side.

The ovary represents the hammer used to drive the nails and the three styles the three nails used to hang Jesus from the cross.

The fruit is called a May-pop, and the Indians believed that it would cure insomnia and relieve stress. When the Jesuits saw the Indians eating the fruit, they interpreted it as the Indians being hungry for Christianity and began converting them. Passionflower is a symbol of faith and piety.

DRUMMOND'S PHLOX (*Phlox drummondii*)
POLEMONIACEAE/PHLOX FAMILY

More than 40 species of phlox grow in the United States. The word *phlox* is Greek and means "flame", which was used to describe the colors of the flowers. Phlox leaves were crushed and added to water as a cure for upset stomachs, sore eyes, and skin irritations. An extract from the leaves was also used as a laxative.

Phlox drummondii was named for Thomas Drummond, a Scottish botanist who collected plants in Texas. Although he never made it back home, the seeds of the phlox collected in and around Goliad did, and today, phlox is grown in European gardens and window boxes.

In the language of flowers, phlox symbolizes sweet dreams and a proposal of love.



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