

Lesson Plan: Remembering Memorial Day

Overview: Plants have always played a central role in the Memorial Day activities, when families and civic groups decorate the graves of fallen soldiers with flowers and wreaths. After WWI, the red poppy became an international symbol of reverence and honor for these military heroes. Even now, 100 years after the end of WWI, many people in the U.S. still pin a fabric poppy to their lapel on Memorial Day as a sign of respect and remembrance. Use your school garden program to introduce students to the history and significance of Memorial Day.



Grade Level/Range: 6- 12th grade

Objective:

Students will learn:

- the history that led to the establishment of Memorial Day
- the many ways plants are used as symbols in our culture
- how to make seed balls with red poppy seeds (or other types of seeds)

Time: 30 minutes to 1 hour

Materials:

- Internet access
- Copies of the poems “In Flanders Fields” by John McCrae and “We Shall Keep the Faith” by Moina Michael
- Red poppy seeds
- Clay
- Compost or potting soil

Background Information:

Memorial Day has largely become known as a three-day weekend holiday full of picnics and department store sales. It's true purpose is often overshadowed by the long weekend of fun events that kicks off the summer season. Memorial Day was originally known as Decoration Day starting in 1868. It was a special day set aside for Americans to remember the fallen soldiers of the Civil War, and to honor them by placing flowers and flags on their graves. Later the focus expanded and it became a day to remember all those who died while serving in the military. The National Holiday Act of 1971 established Memorial Day as an official federal holiday observed on the last Monday of May.

Although perhaps not as common as it used to be, the sight of a silk or fabric poppy flower pinned to a lapel on Memorial Day is still a meaningful reminder of the true meaning of the holiday.

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How did this humble wildflower come to be a symbol of remembrance?

In 1915, during WWI, a Lieutenant Colonel in the Allied Army named John McCrae wrote a poem titled “In Flanders Field” about the red poppies blooming in the war-ravaged battlefields. In 1918, an American college professor named Moina Michael was so moved by the poem that she responded with a poem of her own titled “We Shall Keep the Faith.” She began a campaign to adopt the red poppy as a national symbol and started selling silk poppies to raise money for disabled soldiers, and urged Americans to wear red poppy flowers on Memorial Day to show their support. Across the sea in France, Anna Guérin was also advocating to have the poppy recognized by all Allied countries. The History Channel offers a detailed summary of the events: <https://www.history.com/news/the-poppy-and-the-poet-how-a-remembrance-symbol-was-born>.

Laying the Groundwork:

As a class or individually, read the two poems that inspired the adoption of the poppy as a symbol of remembrance.

“In Flanders Fields” by John McCrae

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

*We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.*

“We Shall Keep the Faith” by Moina Michael

*Oh! You who sleep in Flanders fields,
Sleep sweet – to rise anew!
We caught the torch you threw
And holding high, we keep the Faith
With All who died*

*We cherish, too, the poppy red
That grows on fields where valor led;
It seems to signal to the skies
That blood of heroes never dies,
But lends a lustre to the red*

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*Of the flower that blooms above the dead
In Flanders field*

*And now the Torch and Poppy Red
We wear in honor of our dead
Fear not that ye have died for naught;
We'll teach the lesson that you wrought
In Flanders field*

Ask students to discuss the poems. Here are a few questions to help begin the discussion:

- Why do you think the poppies made such an impression on the authors of these two poems?
- Why is it so important to remember soldiers who have died in war?
- How can knowledge of historical events help us in the present?

Exploration:

1. Research the growing habits of red poppies. They are hardy wildflowers that can grow almost anywhere. Ask students to consider how their characteristics contribute to their value as a symbol of remembrance. Can you grow red poppies in your area? If so, when is the best time to plant them?

2. Make seed balls as a way to distribute poppy seeds in your community. Seed balls are seeds wrapped in a ball of clay and compost or potting soil so that they are conveniently “packed” for easy distribution. The shell protects the seeds from animals, insects, and too much moisture when they’re sprouting. Seed balls are particularly useful in areas where rainfall is unpredictable. They can be dropped onto the top of a soil-filled container or in a cultivated garden and watered by hand to initiate sprouting, or thrown into an empty lot or field where they will patiently wait for enough rain to begin the germination process. The clay keeps the seeds from blowing or washing away, and protects them from hungry critters. It also keeps the seeds from sprouting until adequate water is available. The compost or potting soil adds a bit of nutrients to help give them a jump start.

Seed balls were used in ancient times, and were rediscovered in the 1900s as a way to introduce vegetation on a large scale to uncultivated land, such as areas devastated by fire or floods. Seed balls are also being used in the Guerilla Gardening movement as a way to beautify vacant lots and urban common areas.

3. Gather the supplies of clay, compost or potting soil, and seeds.

4. Divide your materials so you have:

- 5 parts air-dry clay
- 1 part compost/potting soil
- 1 part seeds

5. Combine the clay and compost. Add a little water if your mixture is dry. The mixture should be moist but not dripping wet, with the consistency of cookie dough.

6. Add the seeds to the clay and compost. Thoroughly work the materials together with your hands.

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7. Shape the mixture into a ball the size of a golf ball.
8. Allow the balls to dry on waxed paper or a cookie sheet.
9. Once the balls are dry, creatively package them in scraps of cloth or paper bags decorated by the students. Add a small ribbon or a red poppy flower crafted from cloth or paper, along with a note about Memorial Day.

Making Connections:

- Find out about the Memorial Day observations in your area. Discover if there are ways for your gardeners to share their new knowledge about red poppies with the community.
- Distribute the seed balls in your community. This could be a volunteer project, or you may even consider making it a fundraiser to help support your garden program or to donate in honor of veterans in your community.

Branching Out:

History: Learn about other examples where people have used flowers as symbols such as state flowers. Each of the fifty states adopted an official flower to represent the state and its people. Look up your state flower and find out why it was chosen. For example, according to state historian Leon Anderson the purple lilac received the designation as the state flower of New Hampshire because it "is symbolic of that hardy character of the men and women of the Granite State."

Art: Ask students to draw or create a flower (using whatever media you have available) to be their symbol. They can either choose an existing flower or create a new flower. After they finish their drawings, ask each student to explain to the class why that flower represents them.

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