

Red Poppies

- The red poppy, *Papaver rhoeas*, belongs to a group of plants sometimes referred to as “true poppies.” All are members of the genus *Papaver*. Other true poppies include the Oriental poppy (*P. orientale*) and the Iceland poppy (*P. nudicaule*).
- The opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum*) is also a true poppy. This plant produces the seeds that we find sprinkled atop bagels. Opium poppies are illegal to grow in home gardens, however, because the unripe seed capsules produce a milky latex that can be used to make the narcotic opium.
- Other plants include "poppy" in their common names but they aren't true poppies; that is, they aren't in the genus *Papaver*. These include sky-blue Himalayan blue poppy (*Meconopsis* species) and brilliant orange California poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*).



About Red Poppies

The red poppy is native to much of Europe and Asia. However, having naturalized over much of the U.S., vibrant red poppy blooms are a familiar sight in open meadows and wildflower plantings across the country. Other common names for this plant include Flanders poppy, Shirley poppy, field poppy, corn poppy, and American Legion poppy.

Red poppies are annuals, meaning that each individual plant grows for just one season. The seeds sprout in spring and form mounds of feathery foliage. In early summer you'll begin to see fuzzy, nodding buds atop wiry gooseneck stems. Before long, the buds burst into vibrant red blooms with delicate, papery petals. Toward the end of the growing season the flowers transform into distinctive capsules filled with an abundance of tiny seeds. When the capsules dry and open, the seeds may drop on the ground or be carried some distance on the wind.

The red poppy flowers' fragile appearance belies the plants' resilience: All those tiny seeds can remain dormant for years until conditions are just right. Then, they'll germinate and form swaths of brilliant red blooms.

Red poppies thrive where soil has been disturbed. Seeds that have been buried are brought to the surface and germinate in the bare soil. Red poppies are a familiar sight on the borders of farm fields where the soil has been tilled for planting. The common names "field poppy" and "corn poppy" allude to the plants' association with agriculture. Despite the beautiful blooms, some consider these prolific plants a weed.

A Symbol of Remembrance

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Prior to World War I, red poppies flourished in wildflower meadows across Europe, notably in the Flanders region in western Belgium. Sadly, these fields became the scenes of some of the war's fiercest battles. The land was trampled, bombed, and burned.

Despite this devastation, patches of poppies sprouted on the disturbed soil, including among the freshly dug graves of fallen soldiers. Inspired by the beautiful blood-red flowers blooming near his friend's grave, John McCrae, a Canadian soldier, wrote the now-famous poem "In Flanders Fields." [The KidsGardening lesson plan "Remembering Memorial Day" has the complete poem and more: <https://kidsgardening.org/lesson-plan-memorial-day/>.]

Once the fighting ceased, poppy seeds that had lain dormant for years sprouted in profusion, resulting in stunning fields awash in the red blooms. The red poppy came to represent the blood shed during the war and a symbol of remembrance for those who were killed fighting for their country.

In addition to commemorating the fallen soldiers, the red poppy was adopted by the American Legion as a symbol of support and appreciation for living veterans. Fabric poppies were crafted and sold to raise money for veterans, as well as active-duty military families in need. The tradition continues to this day, and it's common to see silk or felt poppies pinned to lapels on Memorial Day.

Junior Master Gardeners World War I Poppy Project

The year 2018 marks the 100th anniversary of the U.S. entering World War I. In commemoration, the Junior Master Gardener's World War I Poppy Project invites youth to sell packets of red poppy seeds. Some of the funds they raise will help finance the building of the National World War I Memorial in Washington, D.C.; the other money they raise will be used to support their school/group garden projects. <http://jmgkids.us/poppy/>

Growing Guide: Red Poppies

Getting started: Red poppies grow 14 to 24" high with 2" to 4" wide blooms. Plan to direct-sow the seeds right in the garden or in an outdoor container. The plants don't do well if started in shallow containers because their long taproots are often damaged during transplanting. If you want to start seeds indoors, choose deep seed-starting pots and handle the plants very gently during transplanting.

Choose the planting site: Red poppies prefer full sun. They adapt to most soils except heavy clay.

Prepare the soil: Begin by clearing the area of all existing plants. Then loosen the soil, pick out large rocks, and break up any clods. Mix in some compost and a bit of balanced, slow-release organic fertilizer. Avoid high-nitrogen fertilizers, which can inhibit flower development. Rake the soil so it's flat and smooth.

Sow the seeds: Prior to sowing, mix the tiny seeds with sand. This will make it easier to distribute the seeds evenly. Also, the sand will give a visual cue as to where you've sown the seeds. Tip: Poke small holes in the bottom of a coffee can, pour the sand-and-seed mix in it, and shake it evenly over the soil.

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Press seeds onto the soil surface: For small areas you can use your hands to firm the soil or press a brick or board onto the soil surface. Don't bury the seeds. For larger areas you can rent a seed roller. A gently spray of water will also settle the seeds into the soil. This ensures that the seeds have contact with the soil. Tip: Birds like to dine on newly planted seeds. If this is a problem, cover the planting area with a thin row cover until the plants are a few inches high.

Water regularly: Keep the soil moist by watering them with a gentle shower every few days. Once the plants are about 6" high and growing well, you can scale back to weekly watering, taking care to moisten the soil 4" to 6" deep. Mature poppy plants are relatively drought-tolerant but will still benefit from watering during periods of extended dry weather.

Cutting poppies for bouquets: Poppy flowers don't last long in a vase, sometimes just a day. One way to extend that time is to sear the cut ends of each stem with a match before placing them in a vase of water. In addition to the brilliant flowers, poppy seed capsules are also a striking addition to a vase of fresh flowers, as well as to bouquets of dried flowers.

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