

Flowers, hearts and decapitations

Valentine's Day is a day to show affection for our loved ones, but it also happens to be one of the most profitable holidays of the year.

Although the giving of flowers makes up only a small part of the spending, far behind Christmas or Mother's Day for our retailers, it still brings in customers and money.

The traditions we experience on February 14 are familiar to all. Less well known are the stories behind how they got started.

An inauspicious beginning

February 14 is the feast of St. Valentine, a Catholic saint who was beheaded by Roman Emperor Claudius II on that very day in the third century A.D. Many legends try to explain why the saint was put to death. A popular tale says he officiated weddings for young couples after Claudius outlawed marriage for young men. The emperor believed men who weren't romantically involved would make better soldiers.

Another story says he helped Catholics who were imprisoned for their beliefs.

However it is quite possible that the holiday was promoted to overshadow the pagan festival of Lupercalia which took place between February 13 and 15. Celebrants sacrificed goats and abused women in the hopes of making them more fertile. Pope Gelasius I (who served from 492–496 A.D.) outlawed Lupercalia and officially declared February 14 to be Valentine's Day.

My youngest daughter once asked me why the day was called Valentine's Day. I remember the horrified look on her face when I told her this story of a beheaded priest.

Legend has it when St. Valentine was in prison, he prayed with the daughter of one of his judges. Before his execution, he wrote her a letter, signing it "From your Valentine." The signature caught on and is used to show affection.

Hearts, roses and chocolate

We associate Valentine's Day with the heart shape, roses and chocolate. But if the heart shapes we draw were anatomically correct, the result would be a complex image of

valves and muscles.

If the Catholic Church theory is taken into account, the heart came to St. Margaret Mary Aloccoque in a vision in the 1600s. The heart appeared to her surrounded by thorns. This symbol is known as the Sacred Heart of Jesus and a representation of His love.

Roses have an anchor back to the Victorian era, when people expressed their emotions through floriography, otherwise known as the language of flowers. Giving a certain kind of flower conveyed a specific message, and red roses meant romance.

Getting flowers to bloom in February is a challenge, but what do the colors mean? Yellow conveys friendship and joy; lavender is associated with love at first sight, and dark pink designates gratitude and appreciation.

My existence in the male gender has made me unaware of such differences, instead defaulting to the binary judgement of flowers or no flowers (and thus in good graces or in trouble).

As for boxed chocolate and Valentine's Day, Richard Cadbury should get the credit (or blame). He discovered a way to extract pure cocoa butter from whole beans and the "extra" that was not used for a chocolate drink was converted into "eating chocolate." This turned into beautiful boxes for his special Valentine's Day delicacies in the shape of cupid and roses.

The State of Oregon's preferred chocolate is the chocolate rose. My wife Jennifer would prefer the states of Idaho, Iowa, Maryland or Pennsylvania, where M&M's rule supreme.

Hallmark and a cottage industry

Around the 18th century in England, it became a common custom to give out handwritten notes for Valentine's Day as a sign of affection. Eventually, printing technology improved and ready-made cards supplanted the more personal handwritten effort.

The practice reached America in the 1840s when Esther Howland, a student at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, decided she could make cards as beautiful as the British. Under the name New England Valentine Co., Howland earned acclaim as the "Mother of the American Valentine."

Now Hallmark sells 145 million Valentine's Day cards a year, just behind



Jeff Stone
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their total number of Christmas cards. They have 1,400 different cards in print.

Conversation hearts

Conversation hearts — those little, pastel-colored candies with pithy romantic entreaties such as "kiss me" on them — have become the bane of the Stone family existence.

Love them or hate them, these hearts are everywhere the weeks leading up to Valentine's Day. If you have younger children, making sure every classmate receives the candy hearts is the focus of a household.

But not many know that these hearts date back to the days of the American Civil War, when their predecessors — candies called "cockles" — were popular. Similar to fortune cookies, these treats were shaped like scallop shells and contained paper messages.

In 1866, candy companies began churning out miniature candy hearts, then called "motto hearts." The sayings have evolved a lot since those days of "be mine" and "love you." I shudder to think about what they could say today: "Tweet me", "PM (personal message) me" or something equally horrifying — surely romance at its finest.

Our part in a special day

While not a huge holiday like others, the florist industry is slammed during this love-filled holiday. Valentine's Day also signals the unofficial "opening day" for spring sales at nurseries. (For this particular executive director, it also signals when pitchers and catchers report to camp).

Love is in the air for many in our industry and it's a good time to take stock of the many relationships and friendships we enjoy. Nobody should lose their heads over it but from my family to yours — hope you have a wonderful holiday and the start of the spring season! ☺