

Carnation, Pinks, Sweet William

Botanical Name: Dianthus Family: Caryophyllaceae

The Greek botanist, Theophrastus, who identified plants by their form and by their structure, may have first classified dianthus. As you can see they have been identified for a very long time, and he may have named them “*dianthus*,” from the Greek *dios* (divine) and *anthos* (flower). The most common dianthus are carnation, pinks and sweet Williams.



First, the name carnation may come from *coronation* or *corone* (flower garlands) because carnations were used to make crowns for the Greek’s various ceremonies. Other scholars say the name comes from *carnis* (flesh) referring to the color of the flowers or it may come from *incarnacyon* (incarnation), and so may refer to the incarnation of God, made flesh. Carnations were traditionally the symbol of marital bliss and fecundity. More lore states that the bishop of Treves told Maximilian of Austria to search under his bride’s wedding dress for a carnation hidden there. We are to understand that he did so “tentatively and then with great enthusiasm.”

Secondly, Pinks arrived in Britain in the middle of the sixteenth century. Perhaps you think these flowers received their name because of their color, but in reality pink was not a specific color until the eighteenth century and so the color came from the name of the flower and not the reverse. One theory is that the name comes from Middle English *pinken* meaning to “pierce holes” in leather or cloth and later it came to mean to decorate the edges that is to pink the edges of a material. The edges of the dianthus petals are “pinked.”

Finally, Sweet Williams, the biennial pinks, are a mystery as to the origin of their name as well. Some say the name came from the French *oeillet* (eye), which later became “Willy” and then “William.” Other scholars believe that the name came from Saint William whose festival is on the twenty-fifth of June when the flowers bloom.

Perhaps we will see some member of the dianthus family being presented to Olympians during the 2008 summer Olympics. Let’s look for them.

100 Flowers and How They Got Their Names

by Diana Wells