

## The Common Poppy –*Papaver rhoeas*

Despite its classification as a “weed”, the common poppy, or field poppy, a volunteer plant in vegetable gardens, benefits from widespread sympathy.

Already a part of the (French) nursery rhymes of our childhood, the “...gentil coquelicot, Mesdames...” is assured of our benevolence through the spark of gaiety the luminous red flower exudes. Even when the prolific flower becomes a bit intrusive, we hate to destroy it and always manage to preserve a few roofs. Even the impressionist painters often pay tribute to the plant, like Claude Monet with his ladies holding umbrellas and in wide hats amongst the scarlet tips of poppies.

The poppy comes from North Africa and the Middle East. In the beginning it was considered a “harvest” plant, associated with the harvest because it proliferated in grain fields like the Cornflower. They have been pushed out by herbicides and now are found along roadsides, in vacant lots and in gardens.

The poppy belongs to the *Papaver* family, counting over 60 species of poppies, some of which are highly toxic. When it appears in a vegetable garden, it spreads a large number of small, black round seeds around it, ensuring prolonged presence of the flower. Well, who’s complaining?

Its light green foliage is very low cut, the flowers appear from May to August and are light red with four large petals, a bit wrinkled and featuring a black spot at the base. It has a hairy stem that when broken releases a sticky, white latex substance that contains alkaloids used in pharmaceutical products.

Brews made of its dried leaves are used to fight insomnia through their hypnotic powers, and are also beneficial against bronchial disorders and throat irritations. The common poppy is one of the components of the renowned “Four Flower Infusion” along with Mallow, Coltsfoot and Catsfoot.

The common field poppy should not be confused with its close relation, the opium poppy, whose flowers are pale violet and has wide, grey-green leaves. This plant is clearly toxic through its aggressive hypnotic powers and is coveted by those who seek its illicit substances. Although not a common species, sometimes these poppies also appear in our gardens, where we hesitate to eliminate such a superb plant.

Finally poppy seed is used in pastry and bread making. The petals are also the base ingredient of candies and of a poppy based syrup that is a specialty of the city of Nemours.

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