

A Tale of Two Poppies

I planted an array of vegetables, herbs and flowers in my patio garden in Baja, Mexico. I had built two raised beds, on legs with wheels for convenience. I also planted six varieties of poppies. The following descriptions depict the life cycle of two poppies: the Flanders Poppy and the California Poppy. Related in name as a family, you would never think they are siblings by observing their early growth patterns. This is their story.



Flanders Poppy



California Poppy



The Flanders Poppy



The American Legion or Corn Poppy is most commonly known as Flanders Poppy. It became well known from a WWI poem by John McCrae, titled “In Flanders Fields.” These red poppies with their delicate chalice of red petals became the iconic symbol for the lives lost in the trenches of WWI - hence the term Flanders Poppy which I will use. The poem’s imagery is this:

“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.”

And so this flower is clothed in a poem that is now remembered through a prism of human tragedy. But today, allow me to rewrite this flower’s association with humans with a new narrative, one of Transformation instead of Tragedy.



The Flanders cotyledon seed leaves are two small opposing lance-like needles. They remained this way from September 2022 till January 2023 through the mild Baja winter of rain and wind. I stopped watering them in October and gave up on them as never being able to mature.

But then their vegetative growth started. The plant's first gesture is an expansion outward into a rosette of broader lance-like leaves with longer stems, mostly joined at the base of the plant. This is followed by contraction into a sturdy stem, thick as a pencil, upwards with alternating leaves around the stem with little to no leaf stalk. The stem is heavy and in most plants was weighed down to the ground, curving and winding almost like a vine, but snakelike as thick as my little finger. The later leaves are not broad surfaces like the palm of my hand, but rather spiny and serrated fingers stretching out. There is the sense that they are not extensions to receive and hold light and warmth but active spears, either carved by the light, or penetrating the light.



The stalks have a hairlike surface which one can feel as prickly stubs. As the plant matures these hairs take on a longer purple bearded nature especially visible when backlit by light. Out of this thickened weighted stem come thinner stalks, growing upward, becoming more bearded.



Contrary to their parent stems, these stalks are as thin as straw. But at the top of their reach towards the sun they form a bud that bows downward.



As it matures the thin stalk straightens upward again towards the sun balancing the bud with its hairlike structures, like a nutshell. Unlike the sepals of other plants whose sepals remain attached, the Flanders Poppy sepals fall off to the ground, revealing a totally different look. What earlier had a hair-like surface on sepals and stem, winding its way upward, now becomes a tissue thin transparent red flower as delicate as can be.



A total transformation from a bearded surface, at times nodding down to the earth, now becomes the delicate tissue dress of a sun filled corona. It displays a new quality - a Cinderella effect. A coarser substance has been transformed into a lacey, fragile princess texture of a flower. Its sepals, like slippers, have fallen away.



The four flower petals open to reveal the stigma inside that is orange with a starred formation surrounded by anthers dusted in golden yellow.

But there is a carry over of characteristics from bud to flower. First, the color purple of the ciliated hair structure is now seen in the tender deep red of the four petals. Secondly, the duality of the two sepal pod coverings is now mirrored in two opposing upper petals, cupped underneath by two opposing lower petals. The nature of “two-ness” is striking. The Flanders poppy has two petals supported by two more. We also see a duality of two-ness in animal life. A symmetry of left and right, in face as well as body. The Flanders poppy echoes a duality of structure in the pod cup and then in

the flower. The four-petaled Flanders poppy usually has two opposing black markings on the upper petal. Another two-ness. But since growing flowers are dynamic it can produce exceptions to the rule. Sometimes the markings appear white, and infrequently there can be cases with five petals.



In the reproductive process, the anthers gradually turn blue as they die away. The stigma takes on the deep purple ridges and color once residing in the hairlike structures.



In closing, if some plants like the Venus Fly Trap exhibit movement and the entrapment and digestion (dissolution) of its prey, reminding us of animalistic tendencies, the Flanders Poppy is a distant relative, not in movement, but form. Its structure reveals a duality commonly found in our animal cousins who are more earthbound with all four feet on the ground, and live in a left-right relationship to the external world. For the poppy there is no left-right, but there is a formative principle of dual opposition.

The Flanders Poppy, the Icelandic Poppy, the Oriental, Black Swan and Hungarian Blue poppies all exhibit this drama of overcoming earthbound gestures to flower into a transparent delicate fragile beauty. Ironically, the California Poppy has none of this. Although it carries the name of poppy, it lacks the Cinderella drama. Instead, it's a Rumpelstiltskin story of spinning pure gold out of fibrous straw. The California Poppy writes a totally different script. From the very beginning it knows what it is and goes right to the point. It's a straight arrow upwards to the light.

The California Poppy

The most common California Poppy is a golden buttercup color, aptly named for the Golden State, if not for the gold discovered there.



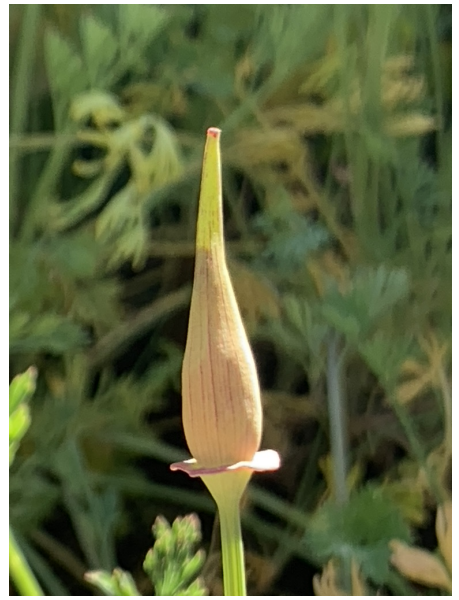
Growth History

I planted a small corner of my shorter raised bed in mid-August with Icelandic and California poppies. They remained runt like and very small, two inches tall and wide until November. To my surprise, after the winter rains they exploded in growth and in mid-January set their first blossoms. One miniature Icelandic appeared first, following the pattern of the Flanders poppy growth. But then, voila . . . an avalanche of golden California poppies appeared who seemed to have a totally different growth cycle. They were late bloomers who showed promise from early on rather than following a circuitous growth pattern of up and down.



Gesture

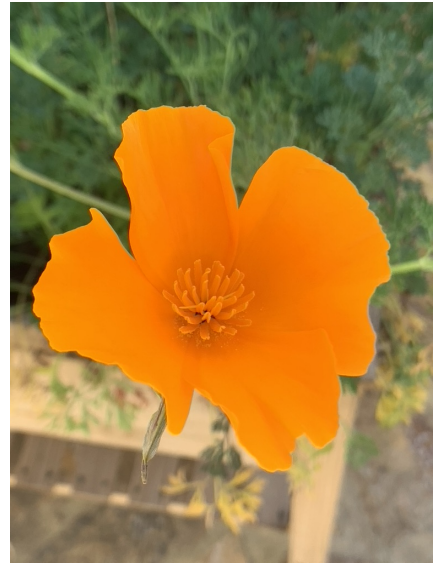
At the very beginning the California Poppy seedling leaves started out lance-like, similar to the Flanders, except the cotyledons were two pairs, instead of two singletons. The leafage then became wispy, airy, almost like a feather with deep indentures, spiny to the sight, silky to the touch. The flower stems are round, thin and extremely delicate. The stalks shoot straight up toward the sun.



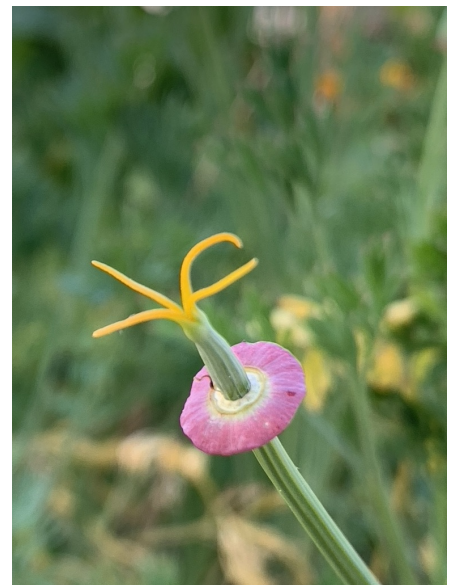
There are no winding detours, no bouts with weighty drama. The stem becomes a thin straw-like vertical reach upwards. At the top it develops an unusual formation that appears as a circular platform, a small purple fringed disk almost like a circus trick balancing a delicate china plate on top of a stick. From the disk emerges a triangular flame-shaped form that tapers off. Unlike the Flanders Poppy that drops its opaque and hairy cuplike sepals, the California Poppy is a flame within a transparent sepal sheath. As the blossom grows it pushes its delicate conical sheath upwards till it falls off.



What's left first appears as a golden cup and then unfurls to four petals, each one more triangular in shape than round.



The Flanders and California Poppies seem very different in their vegetative youth, but their similarities are more pronounced as they mature with their individual flower stems becoming straw-like, thin and delicate. Their sepal structures drop off revealing a common four-petalled flower. But the stigma and pistil betray their vegetative youth. The California Poppy's stigma/pistil is upright like a candlestick ignited by the sun while the Flanders Poppy remains a star-like sphere, round and bulbous like its flower buds. They are definitely not identical twins, but like siblings who in later life find common ground, they now embrace their family name. They are Poppies!



The Flanders Poppy had more of a winding pattern growing up; the California Poppy was born with a direct vertical surge of growth. The Flanders had a more circuitous path, the California grew straight as an arrow. Why are they both in the Poppy Family? Apparently the commonality of their reproductive stage, the similar forms of their seed producing process is more important as a signature and gesture than the divergent ways of their earlier vegetative patterns. Maybe Nature prioritizes what is produced as seed or “fruit” at the end of a life span more than the youthful explorations of its beginning.

And so it may be with us as well! What we experience together as adults may supersede the differences of our youthful past.

Flanders Poppy Upper Stem



Flanders Poppy Leaf Cycle



CA Poppy Complete Stem



Poppy Gestures

Flanders

Gentle heads bowing
 Bearded jaws rising open
 Red tissues emerge

California

Purple plates on sticks
 Circus acts by candlelight
 Golden flames flicker