

Consider the Lilies...

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As a young child, I spent many hours in the rockery in our garden at home, creating little landscapes and houses for my pipe cleaner people and plastic farm animals. By the time I was a teenager, the only career I was interested in was horticulture. Gardening runs in my family – my maternal grandparents, my mum, my siblings, my children, and even nibblings are keen gardeners. My love for all things green and natural was so strong, that it was the only thing I considered studying. After completing year 12, I went off to the local horticultural college and studied horticulture for a few years, receiving an Associate Diploma in Amenity Horticulture and a Certificate of Landscape Technology.

I loved it! It was eye-opening and exciting for me. There was so much to learn about the wide variety of plant species in the world, the intricate biology of flora, the balance of the environment, and how to maintain a garden well. We learnt about the importance of good design, including proper soil preparation, an understanding of the local climate and aspect of a site as well as choosing suitable species that will flourish in the space. And don't get me started on compost! It's one of my favourite topics – understanding how the natural world uses its resources for the next generation of plants, replenishing the soil with useful nutrients to help young plants flourish.

I have had many years of enjoyment working in both my own garden and for others. One of my favourite long-term jobs has been to work one day a week for the past twenty years at our local primary school, where I have planted thousands of plants, and developed a gigantic vegetable patch for the kids to enjoy.

There are so many spiritual lessons we could draw from gardening – learning to put our roots down in the word of God, growing in the love of Jesus, and bearing the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. But today, I want to focus on one aspect of horticulture that I am particularly passionate about – *FLOWERS*.

A few years ago, I often came home from work complaining about the heat and the humidity of Sydney summers, the constant heavy lifting, or getting soaked in the rain. Old age creeping on, I suspect! My husband suggested that I think about a career change to lighter work, prompting me to think. My love of all things natural took another turn, and I decided to study floristry.

Off to college I went again, considerably older than the other students! Another whole new world of beauty and design opened to me. Flowers of all shapes, colours, and sizes were presented to us, and I learnt the craft of constructing a beautiful arrangement that could be gifted to a friend, sold for profit, or used to grace my table at home. Though a late bloomer, I discovered a new skill I loved and had a knack for, and I went on to grow my own flowers and foliage at home, making it even easier to make use of my new skills. I love picking fresh flowers to take to sick friends or when we are visiting for a meal. I have enjoyed doing flowers for weddings and delivering bouquets to cheer someone's day.

My passion for nature has been fulfilling and fun – I love making others happy with my floral offerings. It's surprising how infrequently people receive flowers as a gift, so it's a real joy to be able to give them to others. And, in spite of refusing to go on the flower roster at our meeting for many years, because I didn't think I was any good at it, I now thoroughly enjoy making an arrangement for our ecclesial hall as an offering to God, using the skills He has gifted me with.

The Beauty of Design

One of the main things studying floristry and horticulture has taught me is that – whether in a planned garden, a floral arrangement, or the actual plants and flowers themselves – good design simply does not 'just happen'. It takes care, planning, and intelligence to bring things together for a satisfactory outcome, and it is easy to see the difference between something that has been well-designed and something randomly thrown together. Each year I put in entries to the Sydney Royal Easter Show floristry competitions. It takes me weeks of pondering and planning to create interesting designs that might land a prize. The process – from the initial brief given to me, to constructing the arrangement and entering it in the Show – needs creative thinking and time.

Why do I believe in a God? The beauty of design in nature is something that feeds my faith. The complexity and function that we see in the natural world speaks of a wisdom and purpose to

me. Nature shows me that there is a divine Mind, an incredible Designer and Creator, a God I can believe in, behind everything I look at. When I witness clever design in nature, it's one of many reasons why I believe in Him, and why I feel so passionate about flowers.

That is what I want to chat about today.

I personally find it surprising that, while people always acknowledge the wisdom and creativity of human inventions, many believe the universe came into existence by pure chance, without any thought or creative power behind it. Because God is beyond space and time, He could have created the universe in any timeframe He wanted – instantaneous, a few days, or over many millions of years. The timing and method are irrelevant to me, because wherever I look in nature, amazing design is evident.

Architecture, computing, art, and engineering all point to clever minds at work, creating functioning and beautiful things. We acknowledge the incredible creativity of those minds because it is clearly in the things they have produced. How much more does the diverse brilliance of the natural world point us to the cleverest mind of all!

As Paul writes in Romans:

“... what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world his invisible attributes – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, because they are understood through what has been made. So, people are without excuse.” (Rom 1:19-20)

God's eternal qualities are seen in the things He has created. From the intricacy and enormity of the starry heavens, to the detailed and microscopic functions of the cell, in both the plants and animals, God's fingerprint is everywhere we look.

So let's dive into the world of flowers – just one small area of nature that convinces me of the wonders of a creator God.

Flower Structure

Have you ever looked really closely at a flower? If you picture a cross section of a flower you can clearly see its structure. There are the 'male' parts (the filament and anther, coated in pollen) ready to fertilise the 'female' parts of the flower (the stigma and style that lead down to the ovary, where the developing seeds will grow). The basic framework of most flowers is

relatively simple, but the variety of ways these structures exist is amazing. A flower's purpose is to generate seed so the species can reproduce and flourish. Flowers are mostly stunning and frequently sweet-scented to attract pollinators. Insects and even small animals brush past the stamen and, either inadvertently or deliberately, carry the pollen from one flower to another. In so doing, they touch the stigma and fertilise the flower. God has clothed all these flowers in different and beautiful ways, just to ensure that the next generation can grow and flourish!

Composite Flowers

With so much diversity in the floral world, let's just focus on one family – one of the largest flower groups – the *asteraceae* family. All the flowers in this family have one common feature: they are *composite* flowers. A composite flower looks like a single flower, but it's actually made up of many individual flowers in a single head.

Think about a common sunflower, a member of this family. Initially, you would think it was a huge single flower on a long stem, with a round centre and gorgeous yellow petals. But looking closer, you would see it's actually made up of many tiny individual "disc flowers", growing in absolutely perfect spiraled formation, with bright yellow "ray flowers" around the outside. The whole head flowers from the outside, in towards the centre, over a period of two to three weeks. As it develops, each disc flower is fertilized. The outer ray flowers gradually die and each individual seed grows. Some seeds fall to the ground as the plant ages and dies, and new sunflowers grow. Others provide food for birds and insects that forage in the garden. Even we benefit from this flower, eating healthy sunflower seeds in our muesli, or cooking with delicious sunflower oil. We might even choose to feed the local bird life the black seeds on our back deck or in our gardens.

Besides sunflowers, composite flowers come in all shapes, colours and sizes, just like the members of any family! You're likely to know some of them, because they are fairly common flowers – simple white Daisies, colourful Zinnias, pretty pastel Cosmos, medicinal Echinacea and Feverfew, cheery Rudbeckias, and frilly Dahlias, to name a few. I love growing a number of these flowers in my garden at home.

When you next see a sunflower or daisy, look closely at it and you'll be able to see the tiny disc flowers bunched up together in different formations in the middle of the colourful ray

flowers. Whenever I look at them, the preciseness and beauty of these common flowers has the hallmark and stamp of wonderful design, evidence of a clever designer!

And as I sometimes joke, if you want to give a friend a bunch of flowers without spending too much, just give them a single daisy!

We have looked at only one flower family. There are so many others! Think about the huge variety of flowers that exists around the world, in all colours, sizes, and shapes, each one shouting the glory of God! There are believed to be about 370,000 individual species on earth, each intricately designed and perfect in its own distinct way.

I feel a bit like the apostle John when he wrote about Jesus, *If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.* (John 21:25) We could spend years discussing them all!

And God's hand is visible not just in the world of flowers but in all living things! For me this is both astounding and faith building. We worship an awesome God!

Pollination

When it comes to good design, there is more to consider than just the flower's structure. The methods of pollination are another factor to recognise. Pollination is so important, not just to the plants but to us, too – without it, crops would fail, and people would suffer.

From simple wind or water pollination, to the work of very specific insects or animals, pollination is an essential part of the life cycle of plants. Most commonly, insects such as bees, moths, and butterflies pollinate flowers – their long proboscises dipping into the flower head to collect nectar, or storing pollen in sacs on their tiny legs.

But here in Australia, about 15% of our flowering plants are pollinated by mammals and birds. In fact, we're blessed to have some of the cutest pollinators on the planet! The Western Pygmy Possum is only about 8cm long and lives in Western Australia. Each night it goes from flower to flower, sipping nectar from our native plants, and as it goes along, it collects the pollen and fertilises other flowers.

Seeds

Seeds – the product of pollination – show forethought and design in the way they are spread. Some seeds scatter on a windy day, like the beautiful dandelion puffballs growing in your

lawn, with their tiny parachutes ready to catch the slightest breeze to take them to fresh soil. Plane trees produce winged helicopter-like seeds that flutter in the wind as they fall from the tree. Other seeds have to catch a ride with animals to find new areas to survive, with tiny hooks that catch onto the fur of a passing mammal. Still others drop their seedpods into a flowing stream and are carried along by the currents to fertile ground.

Sometimes, insects like ants will carry seeds back to their nests for food, and will inevitably drop some of them along the way, where they become lodged in healthy soils. Sticky seeds find their way onto our clothing as we hike through the bush, and we brush them off at the end of the day onto our lawns. Some seedpods are like miniature ballistic missiles, exploding and throwing their seed as far as they can, spreading them wildly. Finally, heavy fruits, like avocados and apples, will simply use gravity as they fall to the ground, rot away, and feed the new growing seedling, as it develops. Each of these methods of spreading seed are creative solutions to possible difficulties in reproducing.

All this awesome design in just one small part of the natural world helps convince me of a God. But this is just scratching the surface. There are so many more incredible wonders to witness, from microscopic molecules and cells to the vast array of the most distant galaxy. Everything shouts God's praise. His creative hand is evident to everyone.

The Bible and Flowers

So why do I love flowers so much? (Some would say I'm a bit obsessed with them!) For one thing, their sheer beauty is wonderful. They also delight the world with gorgeous scents and glorious colours. As well as that, I love the fact that, far from civilization, even when no one sees them, they are still perfect, still doing exactly what God intended them to do: *praising Him*.

One of the greatest joys and saddest facts about flowers is that they die. Joyful because, as a florist, I can continually play with these magical things, enjoying creating new designs and using fresh blooms, but also sad because I know they won't last forever. Flowers draw our attention in two ways – firstly to live in the present and enjoy something special while it exists, and secondly to reflect on our own mortality.

And this is also the Bible's message about flowers. A number of verses consider not the design and beauty of flowers or the wonder of their creation, but their ephemeral nature, the

fleetingness of their existence, and their inevitable demise. Flowers reflect our own lives, as Peter writes:

For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For,

*“All people are like grass,
and all their glory is like the flowers of the field;
the grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of the Lord endures forever.”*

And this is the word that was preached to you. (1Pe 1:23-25)

All of us are like grass and flowers – we have our day in the sun, and then we die. None of us can save ourselves from the inevitable. Like the flowers of the field, we are transient, but for the grace of God.

By contrast, Jesus encourages us to think about our great value in the sight of God, whenever we think about flowers:

Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you – you of little faith! (Lk 12:27-28)

God takes the time to create such beauty in the fleeting life of a flower, here today and gone tomorrow. Most flowers are never seen or admired by anyone – they bloom and die unwitnessed, and yet they are still magnificent, dressed in such wonderful clothing! And so, we can trust that He will take the time to care for us and provide us with all we need, as He has promised. He has given us the common flowers of the field both to enjoy for their beauty, and to remind us of His undying love for His creation.

And when we look at every part of the unfathomable universe, everything that exists outside my favourite little world of flowers, we see endless design and glory that speaks of a Creator wherever we look.

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*

*Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech; they use no words
no sound is heard from them.
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world. (Ps 19:1-4)*

So that is the encouragement that I get from flowers. Allow the world of flowers to teach and inspire you to trust in a wonderful, creative God who provides good gifts for us all every day.