

**I**t was the intoxicating scent that hit you first, an uplifting, seductively floral tone of lily of the valley. Then you noticed the trees, what seemed like hundreds of hornbeams and English field-maples – all native and all still growing – that lined the aisles of Westminster Abbey. Overnight, the outdoors had been brought in, and there before us was the glorious spectacle of an English country landscape within the environs of one of the country's oldest, and most traditional, monasteries.

Catherine Middleton's marriage to Prince William on 29 April 2011 was a triumph in every way. For a wedding so weighted down with symbolism, expectation and possibility, it was thrilling to see the choices they made work to such effect. However, the Duchess of Cambridge and her dress – as beautiful as they both looked – were not the only stars that day. For me, as one of the 1,500 guests invited to watch the ceremony, the flowers and the foliage stole the show.

There isn't really anyone better to advise on the symbolic nature of the Duchess' choices than the florist Shane Connolly, author of *The Language of Flowers* and the man behind the weddings of the Duke and Duchess; Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles, in April 2005; and her daughter Laura and Harry Lopes, in May 2006. 'The Duchess of Cambridge's choices were greatly guided by the language of flowers,' says Connolly. She had already decided with Sarah Burton that her dress would incorporate the symbolic flowers of the UK in its lace before he even met her to discuss the flowers for the day. 'She already knew all about symbolism,' says Connolly. 'I simply encouraged it.' For her bouquet, the Duchess chose lily of the valley 'because she loved its meaning – "You have made my life complete" – and her mother, Carole, had picked it for her own wedding. We also used hyacinths, which symbolise the constancy of love, and sweet williams for the obvious association.'

Similarly, when my sister-in-law Laura married Harry Lopes, she always knew she would choose lily of the valley, because it reminded her of childhood. 'My father grew a huge mound of them outside the greenhouse in the walled garden of our childhood home,' she says. 'I used to get so excited when they flowered, as I believed flower fairies lived under the white bells.' Laura filled the church with cherry blossom, 'because it was springtime and I love blossom', and opted for hundreds of jam jars brimming with more spring flowers, including crocuses and primroses, on the reception tables.

The stylist and *Harper's Bazaar* contributing editor Leith Clark was equally passionate about her wedding flowers. 'My bouquet was of lilac "boyfriend" roses,' she says. 'They are the most perfect chalky colour and their texture is so soft – like stroking Labrador ears. I love the delicacy and the smell. It's hard to beat the scent of a fresh rose.' For the ceremony, she tied pairs of lilac roses with ribbons and attached them to the chairs that lined the aisle, while the cake was decorated with lilac roses made of chocolate.

Along with the archetypal symbolism, certain blooms have the power to evoke personal memories, some happy, some bittersweet. When Lauren Gurvich King married the London restaurateur Jeremy King last year, she brought a bit of her native New Orleans to Kent. 'We got married at Groombridge Place, with our very own pop-up Wolseley,' she says. 'It was important to us to have everything seasonal, from the food to the flowers. I wanted the latter to reflect the intimacy and surroundings of the English countryside.' However,

she also longed for a memory of home, which she achieved through the hydrangea, peony and rose displays. 'I was surrounded by the flowers of my childhood – the 12-foot purple hydrangea bushes that had been growing at the side of my house since I was born.'

Justine Picardie, the editor-in-chief of this magazine, chose lavender and heather for her wedding bouquet last summer. 'The lavender was in memory of my sister Ruth, who died of breast cancer in 1997, four years after she had been bridesmaid at my first marriage. Ruth loved lavender – as I do – and we planted it together in our gardens, hence the name of the charity I co-founded after her death, the Lavender Trust, which raises funds for Breast Cancer Care.' The lavender she used in her bouquet came from the garden at Tillypronie, her husband Philip Astor's home in Scotland, and it was also in the bouquet that was carried by her niece Lola, Ruth's daughter, who was bridesmaid at her wedding this time around. 'The heather came from Tillypronie, too, and is emblematic of Scotland, a place that I have grown to love since falling in love with Philip,' she says. 'And I liked the folklore that heather brings luck, while lavender is said to be symbolic of devotion.'

What an individual flower may say about a specific union can start to take on even more resonance and poignancy for a second marriage. Watching my mother-in-law, the Duchess of Cornwall, marry the Prince of Wales at Windsor Guildhall in April 2005 was an emotional experience – partly because I was to marry her son, Tom Parker Bowles, later that year, and partly because this was a happy day that we had all waited and wished for. I loved the fact that she chose lily of the valley for her bouquet; for her, it signified 'the return of happiness'. She also chose auriculas because they were the same colour as her light blue dress. 'All the flowers for their wedding in the Guildhall were cut from the garden at the Duchess of Cornwall's house, Ray Mill, and from the Highgrove gardens,' says Connolly, 'which was very symbolic and a special way to celebrate a more mature wedding. It felt like a great statement of a commitment between two people that their flowers came from and went back to their gardens.'

Connolly also created the flower arrangements for my own wedding in September 2005. When I look back on the pictures of the day, I can't help thinking that if I had the chance to do it all again, I would change everything about the way I looked – the only things that would stay the same would be Tom and my flowers. I'll never forget the heady scent of my bouquet – stephanotis and sensual gardenias, symbolising, respectively, a transport to ecstasy and a promise of delights. (When consulting my husband for this piece, he assured me that he has delivered on both counts...)

This month marks the two-year anniversary of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge's union; and the maple-trees that brought Westminster Abbey to life on that memorable day are still flourishing, having been planted at Llwynywermod, the Prince of Wales' house in Carmarthenshire. And, thinking back, I am reminded of another guest's remark as we were making our way to Buckingham Palace after the ceremony, for the wedding reception hosted by the Queen. She said that Catherine and William had both always longed for a traditional English country wedding but, knowing that this was impossible, they did the next best thing and brought the countryside to the majesty of the Abbey; more evidence, if ever we needed it, for the unspoken yet powerful union of nature and romance. □

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