

Ancient Greeks used flowers to honor gods, decorate guests and sacred places, and mark important events. Wreaths, garlands, and loose flowers appeared at festivals, weddings, banquets, and rites for the dead.

Flowers at religious festivals

Religious festivals brought people together for processions, sacrifices, music, and other public events. Participants could wear wreaths or carry garlands, while altars, shrines, and sacrificial animals might be decorated with flowers and greenery. These decorations helped make the occasion distinct from ordinary life and expressed honor for the deity receiving the offering.

Plants used in sacred settings varied. Laurel had a particularly strong association with Apollo, and its leaves could be woven into wreaths. Ivy was associated with Dionysus. Both were valued as greenery, even when flowers were also part of the decoration. The plants chosen could identify the god being honored as well as beautify the gathering.

Flowers themselves could be presented as offerings. Their freshness and scent made them suited to the temporary decorations of a festival, though they did not survive long after being cut. Literary and artistic evidence shows plants and wreaths in these settings, but it does not give a complete account of every local practice.

Wreaths at banquets

At a symposium, the drinking party that followed a meal in some Greek social settings, guests could wear wreaths. These were made from leaves or flowers and tied around the head. The wreath was part of a setting that could also include music, conversation, and scented oils.

Greek writers mention roses and violets among the flowers associated with wreaths and festive surroundings. A wreath added scent and color to the gathering, and making one required enough flexible stems or a support to hold the flowers together. Guests did not necessarily wear the same plants at every banquet.

Weddings and shared customs

Wedding celebrations could include flowers and greenery as decoration. Wreaths were connected with the bridal couple, and floral decoration helped mark the transition from a ceremony to a feast. As with other Greek customs, practices could differ by place and period.

Across different occasions, flowers could serve several purposes:

- Woven into wreaths worn on the head.
- Arranged as garlands around an altar or other setting.
- Presented as offerings to a god.
- Placed at a grave to honor the dead.

Honoring the dead

Flowers also had a place in funerary rites and visits to graves. Relatives could bring offerings to a burial site, including wreaths and other plant materials. These acts expressed remembrance and formed part of the continuing relationship between a family and its dead.

Not every use of flowers belonged to a celebration in the modern sense. The same familiar forms, especially wreaths and garlands, could signal joy at a feast, reverence at a shrine, or care for someone who had died.

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