



Alamosa Landscapes

Flower and Plant Idioms & What They Mean

by Marilyn Loser

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With our recent sprinklings of snow and colder weather, I'm less inclined to do much in the garden other than wander about and let my mind wander.

As I drifted along the paths, two phrases came to mind -- "lead someone down the garden path" and "primrose path". To "lead someone down the garden path" (or "up" as they tend to use in the United Kingdom) means to deceive or mislead in an enticing way; to lead on; to delude. An example: The voters had been led up the garden path too often to take a candidate's promises seriously.

A primrose path at first blush sounds like a path strewn or bordered with colorful flowers. According to the "Cambridge English Dictionary", if you lead someone down the primrose path, "you encourage that person to live an easy life that is full of pleasure but bad for them." The phrase was coined by Shakespeare in Hamlet, 1602. According to phrases.org.uk, Ophelia warns her brother to avoid "the primrose path of dalliance."

As I stood on the lawn, I thought about "Don't let the grass grow under your feet." This is easier to understand – act, don't procrastinate. But during Alamosa's winter grass is dormant so I don't feel I need to move too fast!

For some phrases such as "Nip it in the bud", you can unearth origins or first uses. The idea is to halt something at an early stage. For example, from idioms.thefreedictionary.com "By arresting all the leaders, they nipped the rebellion in the bud. This metaphoric expression, alluding to a spring frost that kills flower buds, was first recorded in a Beaumont and Fletcher play of 1606-1607." I've had many a flower literally nipped in the bud in Alamosa!

It seems I've known the phrase "Beat around the bush" forever. I know it means to prevaricate and avoid coming to the point, but I never thought about the origin. In days of old during bird hunts "some of the participants roused the birds by beating the bushes while others caught the quarry in nets," reports phrases.org.uk website. Apparently grouse hunting still use beaters today. The first known appearance is in George Gascoigne's "Works" from 1572.

Another bush term is "bush league." Most of us know it is slang for something that is inept or second-rate. What I didn't know is that it comes from minor league baseball. In the early 1900's some teams played on unkempt fields bordered by bushes in rural, "bush" towns. At first it was just descriptive or rural life; now it's used pejoratively.

I think it's easy to understand the meaning of a "thorn in your side" – a persistent difficulty or annoyance. A bit different wording, "a thorn in the flesh", is from the Bible, 2 Corinthians 12:7 in the King James Version.

When I think of violets, I think of very colorful exuberant flowers – just the opposite of shy. However, a "shrinking violet" refers to a shy or modest person. The term first appeared during the time of Keats and Shelley – men who wandered around woodlands composing poetry. This was a time before selective breeding created the colorful, large violets we often see today. In England, the native wood violet (*Viola odorata*) would poke out here and there on the forest floor looking very meek and small and seeming to recoil from tramping footsteps.

A "wallflower" is someone with an introverted personality who attends parties and social gatherings, but will usually distance themselves from the crowd and avoid being in the limelight. I've heard this since I was a child so was very surprised when I first grew orange wallflowers (*Erysimum allionii*) and discovered that they were very showy and did well in the middle of the garden.

The Wiki website says, "The name itself derives from the plant's unusual growth pattern; against a wall as a stake or in cracks and gaps in stone walls." The European plant (*Cheiranthus cheiri*) is in the mustard family and in the wild is found near walls and cliffs.

Well, that may be enough for today and I think I'll go "hit the hay." We know it means to go to bed. It seems to have originated in the United States in the early 1900's when mattresses were often stuffed with straw or hay. "Hit the sack" is a similar expression.

As I was researching this article, I was surprised to find a lot of idiom explanations were at websites aimed at folks that speak English as a second language. This made sense once I thought about it!

Do you have a favorite flower or plant idiom? Let me know at mmloser@adams.edu.

"I hope your life is mostly a 'bed of roses' without too many thorns!" Marilyn

