

Fruits and Flowers for the Chinese New Year

新年花果

BY TERESE TSE BARTHOLOMEW

謝瑞華

Mandarin Orange 桔 (*Gut, Citrus reticulata*)

Piles of oranges and mandarin oranges with leaves attached go on sale in the weeks before the New Year in San Francisco. Both oranges and mandarin oranges are round golden fruits surrounded by emerald leaves. Their shape and color symbolize the sun and connect with the *yang* principle, which represents the positive element and generative force in nature. Thus oranges are considered auspicious fruits and important symbols for the New Year.

Flower markets offer potted plants full of these lovely golden fruits, ideal for indoor decoration. These fruiting shrubs represent the Cantonese terms *gut shue hoi fa* (吉樹開花) and *gut shue kit gwo* (吉樹結果), meaning “flowering of the lucky tree” and “the lucky tree bearing fruits.”

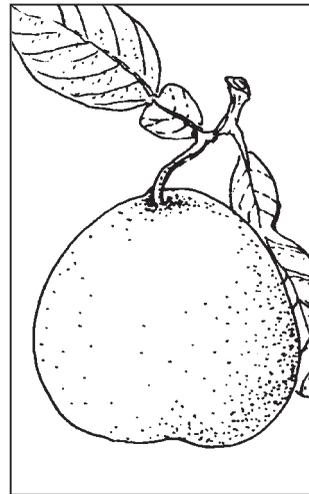
The name of the fruit is *gut* in Cantonese, and therefore it symbolizes good fortune (*dai gut*). It is an important item for the household. At the New Year a pair of mandarin oranges, together with red envelopes of money, is placed next to the pillow of every child in the family. This stands for *dai gut lai see* (大吉利是), “good fortune and good business.” The same items are placed on top of the *chuen hop* (全盒), the circular box containing New Year’s preserves and candies, as well as above the family rice container, to bring good fortune for the home. Dishes of oranges



are also placed in front of altars and on top of New Year’s gifts for one’s friends. Mandarin oranges are used as a “return” gift when one is given a New Year present.

Pomelo 沙田柚 (*You, Citrus grandis*)

The green pomelo, which becomes yellow when ripe, is a common sight in the shops of Chinatown before the new year. It is a delicious fruit, and the rind can be used in Chinese cooking. The Chinese believe it is important to have at least one pomelo in the house for decoration, or better still, to have a pair, since good things always come in pairs. In Cantonese, *you* is similar in sound to the phrase “to have.” To use a pomelo to decorate one’s home during the new year implies a wish that the home will have everything it needs the coming year.

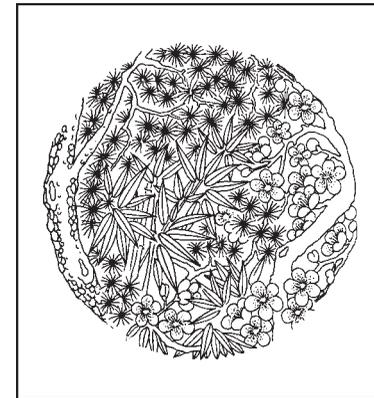


Three Friends of Winter—Pine, Bamboo and Plum 歲寒三友：松竹梅 (*Suihan Sanyou, Song, Zhu, Mei*)

The pine (*Pinus* sp.), bamboo, and plum (*Prunus mume*, also known as Japanese Apricot) have been known since the Song dynasty (960–1279) as the “Three Friends of Winter.” In the cold season when most plants are dormant, the bamboo and pine remain green, and the plum is the first to bloom.

These three plants are models of fortitude and uprightness in adverse conditions, and this type of resistance to the elements is admired by the Chinese. As a result, this motif reigns foremost among the botanical motifs of China.

As individual plants, the rugged pine is a symbol of nobility and venerability. As a longevity symbol, the pine is often shown with the crane. The bamboo with its straight exterior and hollow culm symbolizes humility and fidelity. It has integrity for it bends in the storm but does not break. The plant is closely associated with the everyday life of the Chinese because so many household objects are made of bamboo. Su Dongpo, the famous poet of the Song dynasty, remarked that he would rather go without meat than to live without the bamboo. Foremost among the flowers, the plum is emblematic of perseverance and purity. The five petals of its flower make it an auspicious plant because five is a sacred number in China. In this instance the five petals represent the Five Blessings: old age, wealth, health, love of virtue, and a natural death.



All three plants, together or individually, are a source of inspiration for the Chinese, and are represented in every field of Chinese art.

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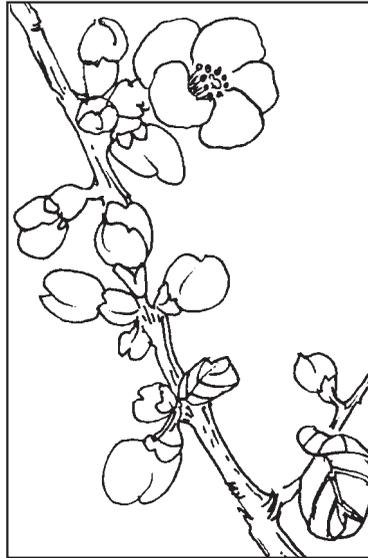
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Quince 貼梗海棠
(*Tiegeng Haitang, Chaenomeles lagenaria*)

Although native to China, this plant is also cultivated in Japan and is known as Japanese quince. Its branches are thorny and bear showy blossoms that range from scarlet to pink or white. The flowers have short stalks, hence the name *tiegeng*, or sessile flowered. In San Francisco, the quince flowers around the New Year, and it has become a substitute for the peach and plum trees of China and Hong Kong.



It is customary for Chinese to decorate their homes with blossoms during Chinese New Year. For without flowers, there will not be any formation of fruit. The southern Chinese have a tradition of displaying a blossoming peach tree or plum tree at home during the Chinese New Year, and immigrants have continued this custom. In Hong Kong and Canton, thousands upon thousands of peach and plum trees are sold in the annual New Year Flower Fair, and the Chinese buy these trees just as Americans buy pine trees and fir trees to celebrate Christmas. The Chinese believe that blossoming flowers will bring prosperity (*huakai fugui*, 花開富貴), therefore considerable care is taken in choosing these trees, so that many of the buds will bloom on New Year's day.

Peach blossom 桃花
(*Taohua, Prunus persica*)

The peach tree with its pink blossoms is a standard decoration for the New Year. Considered sacred in China, the wood of the peach tree was used as a charm (*taofu*, 桃符) against evil in ancient times. Numerous peach trees are sold annually during the New Year flower fairs in Canton and Hong Kong. They are brought home and kept in the oldest and nicest porcelain vase in the family, for it is believed that the older the vase, the longer the flowers will bloom.

The peach, an emblem of longevity, is of paramount importance in Chinese culture and is one of the most popular motifs found in Chinese art. It is the symbol of the venerable God of Longevity, Shoulao (壽星). Xiwangmu (西王母), the Queen Mother of the West, is believed to possess an orchard of peach trees in her abode up in the Kunlun mountains. The trees blossom only once every 3000 years, and the fruit takes another 3000 years to ripen. It is believed that eating these peaches will grant immortality.



Narcissus 水仙花
(*Shuixian, Narcissus tazetta var. orientalis*)

Known to the Chinese as Water Fairy Flower, Elegant Garlic (雅蒜), or Fairy of the Waves (凌波仙子), the narcissus, a symbol of good fortune and pros-

perity, is an important and beloved flower of the Chinese New Year. Narcissus has a pleasant fragrance. The yellow cup resting on white petals gives it another elegant name, *jinzhan yintai* (金盞銀臺), or Gold Cup on a Silver Stand. This flower came originally from Europe, but was already known in the Tang dynasty. Legend has it that Emperor Minghuang (唐明皇) (712–756 CE) presented twelve pots of red narcissus to Lady Guoguo (虢國夫人), the sister of his beloved concubine Yang Guifei (楊貴妃).

The cultivation of the narcissus is confined to southern China, and the bulbs of Zhangzhou, Fujian (福建漳州), are considered the best. Narcissus bulbs can be grown easily in a shallow dish called a *shuixian pan* (水仙盤). The bulbs are held in place by smooth pebbles; the dish is then filled with water and placed in the sun.

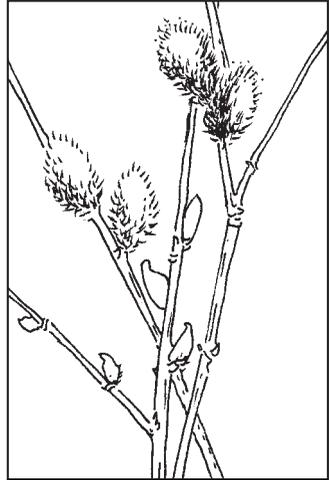
The narcissus in southern China is cultivated in two ways. Grown naturally, it has straight leaves and flowers. But if the young bulb is mutilated on purpose by having some of its scales cut away, the plant becomes stunted and the leaves curly. This latter type of narcissus is called “crab’s claw” (蟹爪水仙).

Its simplicity and beauty make the narcissus a favorite motif in Chinese decorative art. When the *lingzhi* fungus (靈芝), narcissus, heavenly bamboo (天竹), and rocks (壽石) are combined together, they form the phrase *zhixian zhushou* (芝仙祝壽), or “the fungus fairy brings birthday greetings.”



Pussy Willow 銀柳
(*Yin liu, Salix sp.*)

Since the Chinese like numerous blossoms on a branch, the many buds of the willow make it a favorite flower for Chinese New Year. The fluffy white blossoms of the pussy willow resemble silk, and they soon give forth young shoots the color of green jade. Chinese enjoy such signs of growth, which represent the coming of prosperity.



Kumquat 柑橘
(*Gumgut, Fortunella margarita*)

Pronounced Gumgut in Cantonese, the kumquat is a pun for gold (*gum*, 金), and for good fortune (*dai gut*, 大吉). Cantonese love to decorate their homes and places of business with pots of kumquats, in the hopes that they will bring good fortune and wealth. Candied kumquats are one of the necessary preserves for the New Year.

