Arbeia Society Notes

No. 7: Wreaths and garlands in the Roman world

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The Romans used leaves and flowers for making wreaths (shaped into a circle) and garlands (hung between fixed points). There were a number of different terms used to describe them, but the most common was 'corona' ie. crown, although the word in English brings up a very different image. Wreaths and garlands were used as a symbol of status, in religion and on social occasions.

1. USES

1.1. The use of wreaths as indicators of status

Emperor Hadrian wearing a wreath, tied with a bow at the back. Arbeia South Shields Roman Fort

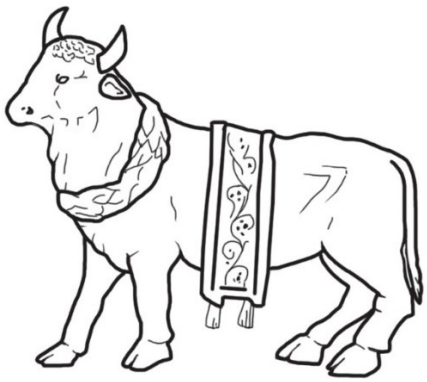
Wreaths were original awarded to competition winners, in anything from athletics to poetry. They were also worn by victorious generals in the army, and given as rewards to individual soldiers for out-standing actions. As symbols of victory and honour they were originally worn by kings and then became part of the regalia of Emperors, who are frequently shown wearing them on coins. These 'status' wreaths were generally made from leafy plants rather than from flowers, and different plants were used for the different awards. Bay laurel was probably the most commonly used plant, but oak, olive, myrtle and even grass were used. Gold examples were also known.

1.2. The use of wreaths and garlands in religion

A shrine with painted garlands made of blocks of different coloured flowers and occasional leaves. The two household gods, Mercury and Bacchus all wear wreaths. Shrine from the café of Vetutius Placidus in Pompeii.
Carole Raddato from FRANKFURT, Germany, CC BY-SA 2.0 <https://via Wikimedia Commons

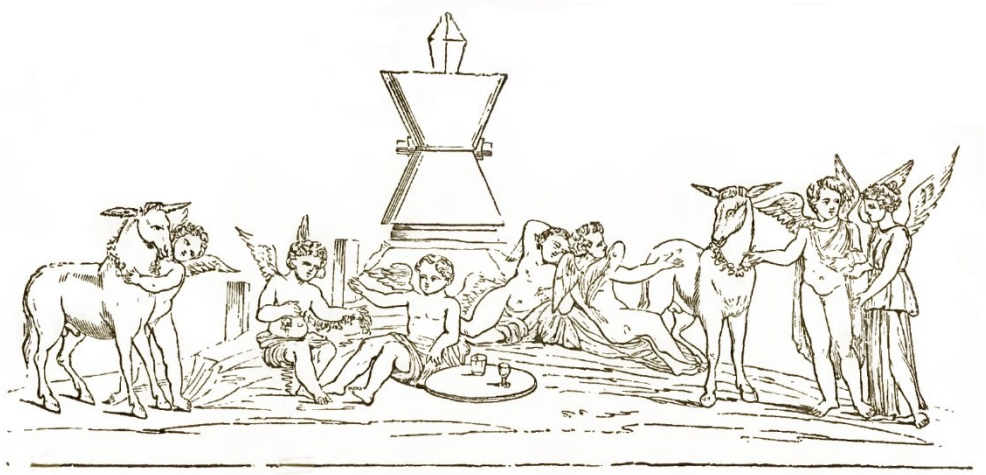
Garlands and wreaths were used extensively in religious activities, and the early Christian writer Tertullian remarked that: 'The very doors, the very victims and altars, the very servants and priests, are crowned' (*On the Crown*, chapter 10). As well as the temples, small household shrines were hung with garlands, and altars decorated. Painted garlands are a very common feature on shrines and religious scenes, both hung in long swags and vertically, often tied with ribbons. In Pompeii some shrines have nails in positions that suggest genuine flower garlands could be hung in place of the painted ones when needed (see https://www.academia.edu/43169564/The_Hanging_Garlands_of_Pompeii_Mimetic_Acts_of_Ancient_Lived_Religion).

Frescoes show that the priests officiating at sacrifices or religious ceremonies could wear wreaths, as could those bringing the animals to sacrifice, or carrying the offerings, although the person actually carrying out the sacrifice normally had their head covered with their toga or mantle and so did not wear one.



An ox with a neck garland being led to sacrifice, from a relief in the Antiquities Museum of Stockholm Palace (for the full relief see https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Stockholm_-_Antikengalerie_Opferszene.jpg)

A small number of reliefs depicting sacrifices show, as Tertullian mentioned, the animals about to be sacrificed wearing garlands round their neck, although most only show the decorative band draped across the back.



A drawing of a destroyed wall-painting from Pompeii showing Cupids relaxing in front of a millstone in a bakery
After T. Dyer (1887) *Pompeii, its History, Buildings and Antiquities*

On 7th June each year, as part of the Vestalia festival in honour of the goddess of the hearth, Vesta, the millstones used in bakeries and the donkeys that powered them were decorated with garlands. Ovid wrote that on this day 'loaves are hung from garlanded donkeys and flowery garlands drape the rough millstones' (*Fasti*, 6.319-48). A destroyed wall-painting from Pompeii showing Cupids (and one Psyche) celebrating the festival of Vesta by relaxing, drinking and making garlands and placing them round the necks of the donkeys.

Another form of celebration was the Rosalia, the festival of roses. The Roman army had set dates in May when they honoured the military standards with garlands or wreaths of roses, but 'rose days' (*dies rosalis*) could take place at any time when roses were available. The festivals were frequently used to remember the dead, when tombs would be decorated with the flowers.

'Flower days' could also include other flowers, such as violets. An inscription recording the gift of land on the Via Appia at Rome to the 60-strong *Collegium* (Association) of Aesculapius and Hygiae as a place for the Association to hold banquets laid down that 'on 22 March, on the day of violets, presents of wine and bread should be distributed … it was decided that on 11 May, on the day of the roses, in the same place presents of wine and bread shall be distributed to those present' (https://philipharland.com/greco-roman-associations/322-regulations-of-the-association-of-aesculapius-asklepios-and-hygiae/).

As well as used as decoration, garlands and wreaths could be given as offerings. Varro records that at the Fontanalia (Festival of the Springs) people 'throw wreaths into the springs and place them on the well-tops (Varro, *On the Latin Language*, 6.22). Wreaths could also be placed on the statues of deities, either permanent ones of metal

or temporary ones of leaves or flowers. The plant used to make the wreath could depend on the deity; the god of wine, Bacchus, for example wore a wreath of ivy or vine, and Tibullus hung a wreath made up of ears of wheat at the door of the temple to Ceres, the goddess of agriculture and grain crops (*Elegies.* 1.1).

This association with both pagan deities and their worship meant the early Christians frowned upon wearing wreaths, even at social occasions.

1.3. The use of wreaths and garlands in celebrations

The month December from a 'calendar' mosaic from Sousse, Tunisia. It is assumed the three men are celebrating Saturnalia, the most notable event of the month, and are shown wearing wreaths in celebration (although it is unclear why they are half-naked).

Soldiers wore bay laurel wreaths in the late Roman period when making their annual renewal of vows to the emperor, and when they were getting paid extra money, while civilians wore wreaths when celebrating successes of the Emperor, as part of public festivals, and sometimes when getting married or when being made a freedman (Tertullian, *On the Crown*, chapters 12-3). They could also be worn at meals with friends. While wreaths used in celebrations could be made of leafy branches they were just as commonly made out of flowers chosen for their colour and scent. The first-century Greek author Plutarch recorded an after-dinner conversation on the topic of 'whether it is fitting to wear wreaths of flowers at table', when 'after supper many of all sorts of flower wreaths being presented to the guests, Ammonius began to tease me for choosing a rose wreath instead of a bay laurel one, saying that those made of flowers were rather effeminate, and better suited to girls and women at leisure more than learned and cultivated men' (Plutarch, *Moralia*: *Table Talk*, book 3, question 1).

1.4. The use as garlands as external decoration

Drawing of a fresco showing part of the market in the Forum, from the House of Julia Felix in Pompeii
From *Pitture Antiche d'Ercolano e Contorni*, Volume 3 (1762)
https://archive.org/details/A216168/page/n243/mode/2up

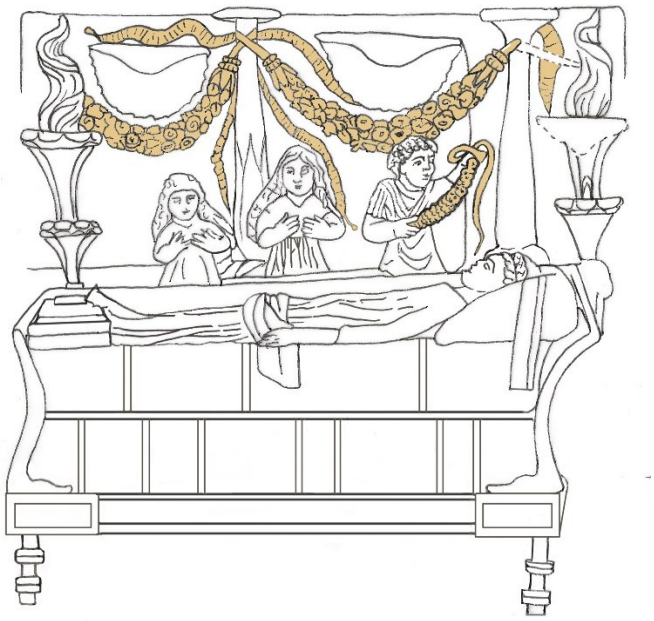
Houses and temples could be decorated with garlands or branches of greenery and with flowers on special occasions, either for religious occasions or for social celebrations, including the use of long garlands hung in swags against walls and between pillars, or round doorways. A series of frescoes from Pompeii, now in Naples Museum, also show garlands hung between the pillars round the Forum of Pompeii, although it is unclear if this was typical or decoration for a special event.

The doorway of the house was a prime place for decoration for major life-events, as it publicised them to both neighbours and passers-by. Juvenal talks of tying a wreath to the doorposts and spreading ivy clusters round the entrance for a wedding (*Satires*, 6.51-2) and placing a wreath at the doorway to announce a birth (*Satires*, 9.85), while Pliny mentions the use of cypress (sacred to Dis, the god of the underworld) in a house as a sign of a funeral (*Natural Histories*, 16.60.139).

1.5. The use of wreaths and garlands in funerary rites

Plants and flowers were used in the house after a death, during the lying in state and then during the funeral itself. Graves were also decorated with flowers, either during the Parentalia festival in February, when the choice of flowers must have been limited (Ovid mentions wreaths and 'loose violets': *Fasti*, 2.537-9), or on other days when family or friends wanted to remember the dead.

A scene on the second-century Tomb of the Haterii outside Rome shows a woman lying in state on a couch before her funeral. In the background large garlands of fruits and flowers with long ribbons are tied to the pillars, while one of the mourners is about to put a garland, probably made from petals, on the corpse.



Scene from the tomb of the Haterii.
For a cast of the original see
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Collocatio_relief_from_the_Tomb_of_the_Haterii_(plaster_cast).jpg

Some wreaths that were placed in graves in Egypt have survived, as with this example of immortelles flower from Hawara.

Wreath of yellow immortelle 'everlasting' flowers (helichrysum stoechas) *found in a grave in Hawara, Egypt*

Pliny mentions that in the past 'status' wreaths, such as those won in competitions, could be displayed on the body before burial, and that wreaths were used 'to honour … tombs and the spirits of the dead' (*Natural Histories*, 21.5; 21.8). In the late second or early third century Minucius Felix, in a dialogue about Christianity between a pagan and his friend Octavius has the Christian point out: 'nor do we crown our dead ... and

in this respect I wonder at you [pagans] all the more for the way you apply to a lifeless person … a wreath to one who does not smell it' (*Octavius*, 38).

Some rich tombs had gardens attached, both to provide a pleasant location for memorial meals but to supply flowers for decorating the tomb itself.

2. LATIN TERMINOLOGY

There are two main words to describe wreaths and garlands:

Corona: The Romans considered this to be the original word used for wreaths, especially military awards and 'the ornaments used in religious rites' (Pliny, *Natural Histories*, 21.2). It was, however, used of wreaths used in social settings as well. It is likely to refer to those made from branches, and therefore quite rigid, like those held up by the goddess Victory.

Goddess Victory holding a wreath. Gold coin of Constantine II

Serta: Pliny said that: 'when however [wreaths] started to be made from flowers they were called *serta*, from *serere* (to join/bind/interweave) or *series* (series/row/chain)' (Pliny, *Natural Histories*, 21.2). The word is used to describe both wreaths worn on the head and the decoration of buildings, and as they are sometimes described as being 'flexible', this term might refer to those decorations where the flowers were strung on a cord.

Other terms are '*corolla*' for 'little wreaths' and the term 'long crown', which may refer to garlands.

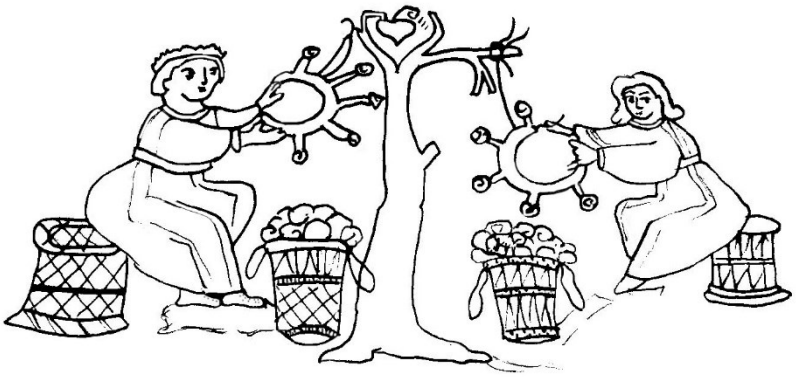
Mummy-portrait of a child, wearing a wreath made of individual flowers laced together rather like a daisy-chain, and holding a flexible flower garland or wreath, folded in half.

Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 41.848, Creative Commons-BY

The use of the two main terms in the same sentence show they had different meanings. Lucretius, for example, says: 'banquets are prepared with magnificent draperies and rich food, entertainment, repeatedly replenished drinks, perfumed oils, wreaths [*corona*] and garlands [*serta*]' (*On the Nature of Things*, 4.1131) and the playwright Plautus wrote: 'If she orders her female slave to carry wreaths [*corona*] or garlands [*serta*] to Venus or Cupid, your slave shall observe whether she gives them to Venus or to a man' (*Comedy of Asses*, 4.1.804).

3. THE MANUFACTURE OF WREATHS AND GARLANDS

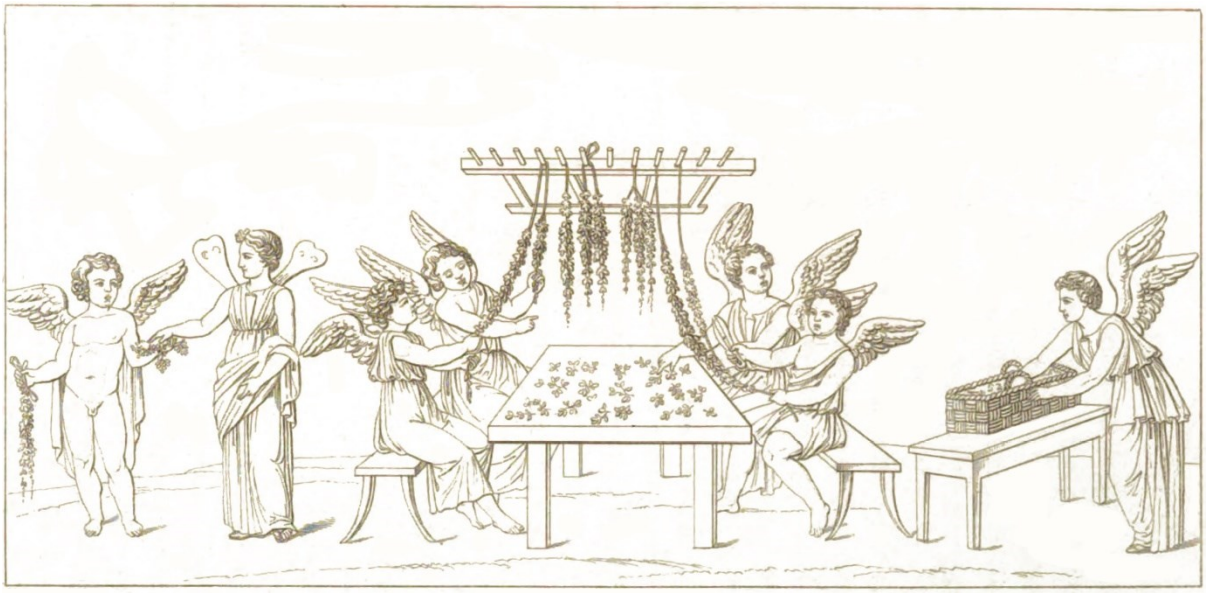
3.1. Making the wreaths and garlands



Drawing of mosaic showing women sitting outside to make wreaths, with baskets of roses beside them. Piazza Armerina Villa, Sicily

Garlands and wreaths were so common in Roman culture that a large industry was required to provide the necessary flowers. Cato recommends that any farms close to Rome should set aside part of the property for growing 'all kinds of flowers for wreaths' to sell in the city (*On Farming*, 8). Varro also pointed out that 'it is profitable near a city to have large-scale nursery-gardens of, for example, violets and roses and many other products for which there is demand in the city' (*On Farming*, 1.16).

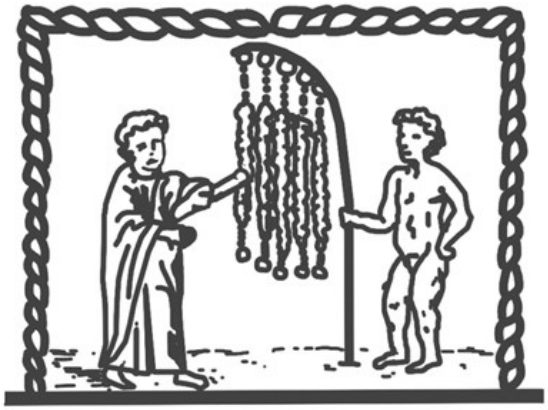
A second-century letter from Egypt mentions some of the quantities involved: a family preparing for a wedding ask some friends to source some flowers for them, who write back: 'There are not many roses here yet; in fact they are scarce, and from all the estates and from all the garland-weavers we only just managed to get together the 1000 that we sent you with Sarapas, even by picking the ones that ought to have been picked tomorrow. We had as many narcissi as you wanted, so instead of the 2000 you wrote to us for we sent 4000 … Sarapas will tell you about the roses – that I did everything to send you as many as you wanted, but we could not find them' (*Oxyrhynchos Papyri*, 46.3313; see https://archive.org/details/oxyrhynchuspapyr0046unse/page/102/mode/2up). Unfortunately they refused to accept payment for the flowers, so we do not know the cost involved.



Fresco of Cupids and Psyches making garlands, Pompeii, marcellum
From Barré (1839) Herculanum et Pompéi vol.2, pl. 84
See https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433081567608&seq=419

Images of garland-makers were a not uncommon motif in Roman art (see G. Guillaume-Coirier (1995) 'Images du *coronarius* dans la literature et l'art de Rome', *Mélanges de l'Ecole Francaise de Rome. Antiquité* **107**, 1093-1151). Scenes of human garland-makers usually show women sitting outside making garlands by tying one end to a convenient tree branch, and may represent garland-making at a household level as a pleasant activity for those with large estates. Images of Cupids making garlands perhaps reflect a more professional set-up, as they use tables and wooden frames to make and display large numbers of garlands. These were no doubt sold in shops and

markets, but a destroyed ceiling fresco from Rome also shows an itinerant Cupid carrying a number of garlands hanging from a curved stick.



Drawing of a vignette of a woman buying a garland. The complete ceiling painting from a tomb in Rome also includes other scenes of collecting flowers in baskets, carrying the baskets and making garlands as well as garlands hanging from circular mobiles and garlands used as a decorative motif.
After P. Bartoli (1738*) Picturae Antiquae Cryptarum Romanarum et Sepulcri Nasonum; for complete painting see* https://archive.org/details/picturaeantiquae00bell/page/64/mode/2up

3.2. Construction of large garlands

Fragment of a garland, possibly from a sarcophagus, with ivy leaves, berries, pomegranates, wheat, bay laurel leaves, vine leaves, grapes and acanthus leaf, wrapped round with a broad ribbon.

Most depictions of the large, bulky garlands used to decorate houses or temples (and just occasionally altars) are not shown in realistic surroundings, so it is unclear just how true to life they were. In art, at least, they were made up of leafy branches which were embellished with flowers, a wide variety of fruit, pine-cones and ears of wheat, often attached at the ends with ribbons, and sometimes with a long spiral ribbon along

their length. The ends of such bulky garlands frequently have an element at either end, made of leaves or ribbons, that tapers the garland to the attachment points. This usually includes at least a couple of collars with vertical slits, perhaps made of a number of narrow strips of leaf gathered together.

Detail of a garland on a sarcophagus from Rome with a conical leaf/ribbon element at either end tapering to the attachment points, which have long ties of ribbed ribbons with their ends divided into two.

The attachment ribbons for all types of garland swags are usually ribbed, ruched or wavy in appearance, perhaps indicating they were made of very thin cloth with stronger selvedge edges, which would also fit with the way they are always shown as floating in the breeze. The ends are also usually shown as being divided at the end, with the cords ending in a knot or similar terminal.

3.3. Construction of small garlands

Wall-painting from Pompeii showing garland-making by Cupids (bird wings) and Psyches (butterfly wings).
The J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection, Malibu, California, 72.AG.82. Digital image courtesy of Getty's Open Content Program.

Smaller garlands for use on shrines and altars were made from flower heads, petals and/or leaves threaded onto a cord. Wall-paintings from Pompeii show cupids engaged

in making garlands out of what are likely to be red and pink roses, tying one end to an overhead frame while adding flowers or individual petals at the other.

Mummy cartonnage of a woman holding a flexible garland or wreath.
Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 69.35. Creative Commons-BY

Many mummy portraits from Egypt, such as the mummy cartonnage in the Brooklyn Museum, show the deceased holding a short garland in their hand. The use of a leaf or similar to hold the petals in place and their short ties are very visible, and very similar to the garlands still made in India. Complete flower heads could be used, or individual petals, which were usually folded before being threaded onto the cord to create the characteristic shape shown on the garland depicted on the mummy.

A modern garland from India with leaf terminals
Yakshitha, CC BY-SA 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons

Cord was left at either end of the garland so that it could be attached to nails etc. On some examples spheres, sometimes shown as green (perhaps folded up leaves) decorate the cord before a final flower. The very ends are usually shown as two separate cords, although a mosaic from a villa in Sicily shows garlands used on an altar with loops at both ends.

Fresco from the Catacomb of Domitilla, Rome. In the centre a Cupid and Psyche collect roses. Around them are loose roses and numerous rose garlands, including some draped over the swags to hang down vertically
Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg: J. Wilpert (1903) *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms,* at: https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/wilpert1903/0054/image,info

Left: detail from image above, showing the ends of the garlands with loose roses around; Right: drawing of a twisted garland with leaves and looped cords from Caddeddi villa, Sicily

3.4. Construction of leaf wreaths

Lamps showing, from left: vine wreath, myrtle wreath and oak wreath
Left: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Cesnola Collection, Purchased by subscription, 1874–76. Open access. www.metmuseum.org; Middle and right: © The Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Leaf wreaths are frequently shown as being very simply made, with two branches or strands tied at the back of the head, usually with trailing ribbons, with the leaves pointing forward on either side of the head. How they were attached at the front is rarely shown; ones made out of gold would be rigid enough to hold their shape, but ones made from real branches presumably had some form of concealed tie. Some images on oil lamps show a range of methods; a vine wreath is tied at the back with trailing ribbons and has a simpler tie at the front; a myrtle wreath appears to have the branches twisted together at the front, and a depiction of an oak wreath glosses it over entirely (unless it depicts a metal wreath).

3.5. Construction of metal leaf wreaths

Wreath of gold oak leaves and acorns
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Mrs. Wallace Phillips, 1957. Open access. www.metmuseum.org

Pliny mentioned that some 'wreaths presented as prizes began to be made out of thin sheets of gilded or silvered bronze' and that '[Lucinius] Crassus the Rich [who died 183 BC] was the first to make artificial leaves of silver or gold, giving wreaths of them

as prizes at his games, to which were also added ribbons. For these attached increased the honour of the bare wreath' (*Natural Histories*, 21.3-4). He also mentions some gold wreaths given as military awards (*Natural Histories,* 33.11).

Isidore of Seville records that 'The Roman emperors and certain pagan kings wear gold crowns' (*Etymologies* , 19.30) and Tertullian mentions gold wreaths worn by magistrates as well as the Etruscan wreath made of 'gems and gold oak leaves' that was used during processions when a sacred wagon carried statues of the gods during public spectacles (*On the Crown*, 13); the same type of wreath was used by generals during triumphal processions. Large gold wreaths were also attached to statues of the gods (Tertullian, *On the Crown*, 13). It was, on the whole, bad news to dream of wearing a gold wreath unless you were already rich and powerful; slaves who had such a dream would end up being tortured; a poor man would be caught committing some terrible crime (and so would also be tortured); people with secrets would have them revealed, and the sick would soon die (Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica*, 1.77).

3.6 Construction of flower wreaths

Pliny said that wreaths had originally been called *serta* from *serere* (to intwine, weave together, join) or from *series* (a line of connected things) (Pliny, *Natural Histories,* 21.2). Tertullian says wreaths were made with flowers 'fastened into each other and tied together by thread or by rush' (*On the Crown*, chapter 5) and the poet Martial refers to ones 'stitched' together (Martial, *Epigrams*, 5.64.4; 9.90.6; 9.93.5).

A mummy cartonnage from Egypt showing a woman wearing a flower wreath
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1919. Open access. www.metmuseum.org

Wreaths made from plants with small flowers would have used the stems of the plant twisted or tied together to form the band itself, making a semi-rigid wreath. A second method used the heads of larger flowers, or their folded petals, threaded onto a cord to create flexible wreaths in the same way that small garlands were made.

Making a replica wreath using rolled and folded rose petals

Some had a wide band of flowers at the front tapering to the sides and just a cord at the back, as on the example worn on a mummy mask of a woman from Egypt in the Metropolitan Museum. There are flowers with pink-tipped white petals at the front (with a central gem), and then green and gold leaves at the side and a cord at the back.

A third form of wreath is shown in late Roman art. A mosaic from the villa at Piazza Armerina, Sicily shows two women making wreaths, sitting with baskets of flowers under a tree. The wreaths hang from the tree on cords and have semi-rigid bands of greenery with five red and pink rose buds standing out at right-angles to the band. The female athletes on another mosaic from the same villa are shown using the same design of wreaths.

Female athletes with wreaths, Piazza Armerina Villa, Sicily

3.7 Construction of cloth wreaths

Close-up of a wreath made from cloth or similar from a mummy-mask

One way of making cloth wreaths involves folding strips of cloth in half lengthways, then folding it back and forwards before adding a stitch to hold it in place. It can then be opened out like a fan. Each 'fan' can then be threaded onto a cord to make the wreath. Possibly ribbons were used, or the cloth was stiffened with glue to stop the edges fraying.

The elements of one possible way of making cloth wreaths, as shown on mummy-masks

4. WEARING WREATHS AND GARLANDS

4.1. On the head

Left: coin of Septimius Severus. Right: mummy-mask from Egypt
Coin by permission Arbeia South Shields Roman Fort; Mummy-mask © The Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0): EA29477

Leaf wreaths are shown worn with the tie at the back at the nape of the neck below the level of the ear, while some flower wreaths are shown being worn more horizontally, above the level of the ear. It is unclear if the more horizontal style is a matter of wreath type, function (eg funerary), region (eg mainly in Egypt) or related to gender or hairstyles.

4.2. Round the neck

Detail of a clay figurine of a dwarf carrying a basket of grapes, wearing a neck garland of flowers. First century, Egypt.
© The Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Depictions of garlands worn round the neck are very rare, although there are some literary references to them. It was originally a Greek practice to wear neck garlands

that had perfumed oils added to them, and it may have remained mainly an eastern empire fashion. Plutarch mentions 'the garlands, chiefly made from flowers, called *hypothymides* that they hang round their neck, and anoint their chests with the unguent with which they are imbued' (*Moralia*, Table Talk, book 3, question 1). Athenaeus, writing in the late second or early third century, describes neck garlands in a very similar way, as garlands with added unguents: '[in the past] 'they also wore garlands on their breasts, and anointed them with perfume, because that is the seat of the heart. And they call the garlands they put round their necks *hypothymides*' (*The Deipnosophists*, 15.16; he goes into detail about the different plants the Greeks used for wreaths in the past). Other authors also refer to this as something that was done in the past (eg Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, 5.1399), so it may have been less common at the time of writing.

A detail from the Hypogaeum *of Vibia, Rome, showing Vibia (to the right) dining outside in paradise; two of the diners beside her have red garlands round their necks. Fourth century.*
Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg: J. Wilpert (1903) *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms,* at: https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/wilpert1903/0134/image,info

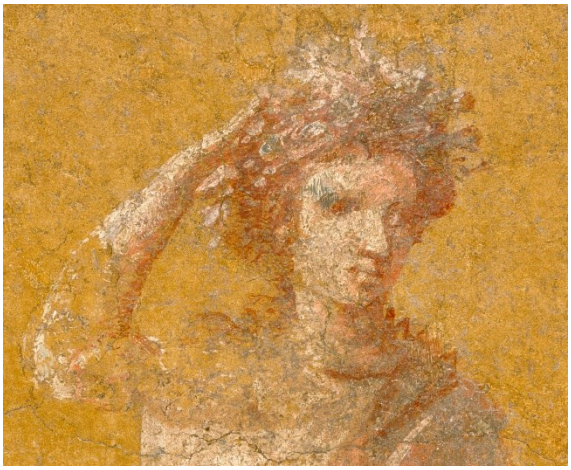
It seems, however, wearing neck garlands was something that the early Christians did, possibly as an alternative to wearing wreaths on the head, as this was closely associated in their minds with pagan gods and religious rites. Writing about the same time as Athenaeus the author Minucius Felix said that while Christians did not wear wreaths on their heads, instead 'we encircle our necks with flexible garlands' (Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, 38). A fresco in the *Hypogaeum* (underground burial chamber) of a Christian woman called Vibia in Rome shows people wearing garlands round their necks; although these particular people are in heaven it would seem this reflects an earthly practise.

4.3. Across the body

Terracotta figurine from Egypt of a follower of the goddess Isis, wearing two wreaths across her body.

A number of statues and figurines of female followers of the Egyptian goddess Isis are shown wearing long floral garlands that rest on the left shoulder and go under the right arm. Only a small number of worshippers are shown wearing the garland, so it was not a typical element of the costume worn by them (although women often wore a coloured or decorated sash in the same way). It might reflect a specific element of cult worship, such as the public processions or a particular ritual or initiation required for progression through the ranks within the religion.

4.4. Who wore wreaths



Fresco of a Muse wearing a wreath

Any-one, from rich to poor, could wear a wreath, with status and money determining if they were made from precious metal by gold-smiths, ones bought ready-made from the market, or household-made ones made from flowers from the garden, or just wild flowers from the roadside. Wreaths of flowers were worn by both sexes, although some people thought they were better suited to women: 'For after supper many of all sorts of flower wreaths being presented to the guests, Ammonius began to tease me for choosing a rose wreath instead of a laurel one, saying that those made of flowers were rather effeminate, and better suited to girls and women at leisure more than learned and cultivated men' (Plutarch, *Moralia*, Table Talk, book 3, question 1: Whether it is fitting to wear chaplets of flowers at table).

5. THE PLANTS USED IN WREATHS

5.1. Seasonal plants

Aramanth (cockscomb)

The Romans had to use whatever plants were in season at the time. Of the three favoured flowers, violets were available in spring, followed by lilies and then roses. Plutarch imagined that the god of wine Bacchus had to use ivy for his wreath as vine-leaves could not be had in winter: 'thus Bacchus when in winter wanted a vine-wreath on his head, and finding the vine naked and without leaves, used the very similar-looking ivy; for it imitates all the characteristics of the vine, with twisted and irregular branches, its fresh and disorderly profusion of leaves, and in particular the clusters of berries like ripening bunches of grapes' (*Moralia*, Table Talk, book 3, question 2: On whether ivy is of a hot or cold nature).

Leaf wreaths were no doubt more common in the winter months, but dried flowers were probably sometimes used. Pliny talks of a plant called amaranth used to make 'winter wreaths' ('more truly a purple ear than a flower': *Natural Histories,* 21.23); this is likely to be cockscomb (modern *celosia argentea*), which has a very good flower for drying. A funerary wreath from Egypt was made from immortelles flowers, perhaps from dried rather than fresh flowers, since they dry very well (hence its modern name).

Close-up of a wreath made from cloth or similar from a mummy-mask

Pliny also mention artificial wreaths: winter wreaths 'made from the dyed flakes of horn at the season when the earth refuses flowers' and luxury ones made 'of multi-coloured silk steeped in perfumes' (*Natural Histories,* 21.3; 21.8). Some mummy-masks from Egypt also show wreaths made from cloth, coloured papyrus or similar, as they clearly show continuous S-shaped folds. Artemidorus also mentions ones made out of wax in his book on the interpretation of dreams, although as this is in the context of dreams it may not relate to reality; he also mentions wreaths of salt (*Oneirocritica*, 1.77).

5.2. Health benefits

A bust of Antinous wearing an ivy wreath

There was no great consensus on whether wearing wreaths was good or bad for you. The early Christians disapproved of wearing wreaths for a number of reasons, including the fact that wearing one on your head meant you got neither the benefit of the sight or smell of the flowers (eg Tertullian, *On the Crown*, chapter 5; Clement, *The Instructor*, 2.8). Others, however, thought the smell was still notable even so and the fumes could have a good effect on the body, lessening the effects of alcohol and promoting good sleep. Roses, lilies and saffron could help to prevent headaches and hangovers or, if that was not successful, help cure them afterwards (Pliny, *Natural Histories,* 21.71; Plutarch, *Moralia*, Table Talk, book 3, question 1; Clement, *The Instructor*, 2.8). 'It is an antidote to drunkenness if some-one who is drunk is crowned with ivy' (Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies,* 17.9.23; cf Plutarch, *Moralia*, Table Talk, book 3, question 2: On whether ivy is of a hot or cold nature), while violets 'placed on

the heads in wreaths, or even smelt, disperse the after-effects of drinking and its headaches' (Pliny, *Natural Histories,* 21.76;).

Some people said that it was the god Bacchus who taught humans about the benefits of ivy, and he and his followers were often showing wearing wreaths of it. 'Bacchus was not only considered to be a good doctor for his discovery of wine (a very potent and very pleasant medicine), but for bringing into good repute ivy, the greatest opposite imaginable to wine, and for teaching his followers to wear wreaths made of it, by which means they could be protected against the violence of drunken behaviour' (Plutarch, *Moralia*, Table Talk, book 3, question 1).

On the other hand, Athenaeus repeats a story that the wearing of wreaths originally developed from a cure for headaches. At some point in the past a man found that he could relieve his headache by pressing his head hard and so used a band round his head as a cure. This led people to use bands when drinking, to avoid the bad effects: 'first of all they took wreaths of ivy, which offered itself, as it were, of its own accord, and was very plentiful and grew everywhere and was pleasant to look upon, shading the forehead with its green leaves and bunches of berries'; it was also strong enough to be tied tightly and had no strong smell. Gradually, however, people became less interested in the health aspects of the wreath and more interested in the pleasure of wearing wreaths that either looked or smelt good (*The Deipnosophists*, 15.17).

5.3. Leaves and flowers used in garlands and wreaths

Wood anemone

The choice of plants was no doubt often down to the availability of the plants and to personal choice. Roman literature mentions a huge number of different plants used for making wreaths and garlands, although the modern identification of the plants can sometimes be tricky, especially when the description of the plant is very brief or vague. Modern scholars can end up translating the same word as very different plants, or else offer a range of the possibilities in the footnotes. What would now be identified as separate species were sometimes lumped together as varieties of the same plant by the Greeks and Romans. The fact that different people round the empire called different plants by the same name was recognised at the time; Atheneaus, for example, wrote 'it is plain that the *chelidonium* is a different flower from the anemone

(for some people have called them the same) (*The Deipnosophists*, 15.32), and Pliny talks of flowers that 'are differently named by different people' (Natural Histories, 21.25). Most of the texts were written by men living in the Mediterranean region, so the plants recorded are those that grow in that region.

The following are a selection of those plants mentioned in literature.

5.4. Leaves used in garlands and wreaths: Bay laurel

Χρήστης:Andrikkos / The original uploader was Andrikkos at Greek Wikipedia., Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Bay laurel was the most common type of leaf used in wreaths, so much so that when Isidore of Seville came to explain how the word originated he said laurel (*laurus*) came from the word for 'praise' (*laus*) because 'with it the heads of conquerors were crowned with praises'. He also said the Greeks thought it was suitable for crowning conquerors due to the fact it was an evergreen and therefore never lost its colour, in the same way that those being honoured would never lose their glory (Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies,* 17.8.2).

5.5. Leaves used in garlands and wreaths: Ivy

Ivy flowers, Belfast by Albert Bridge, CC BY-SA 2.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0>, via Wikimedia Commons

Ivy wreaths were often shown worn by Bacchus, the god of wine, and his followers, perhaps because it was said to protect against, or cure, headaches and other bad effects of drinking alcohol (Plutarch, *Moralia*, Table Talk, book 3, question 1; Isidore

of Seville, *Etymologies,* 17.9.23). Pliny said that 'smilax and ivy and their clusters provide the favourite materials' for leaf wreaths (Pliny, *Natural Histories,* 21.28; 21.30). Varro recorded that during the festival of Liber (an ancient god of wine sometimes later equated with Bacchus) on March 17 'old women wearing ivy wreaths on their heads as priestesses of Liber sit in all parts of the town with cakes and a brazier, on which they offer up the cakes on behalf of any purchaser' (*On the Latin Language*, 6.14).

It was good for followers of Bacchus to dream of wearing a wreath made from ivy or vines, but for every-one else it could signify slavery or sickness 'because of their tendrils and the clinging of ivy'. It also prophesized decapitation for those who had done wrong 'due to the cutting of these plants with iron' (Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica*, 1.77).

5.6. Leaves used in wreaths: Spikenard

Indian spikenard
Joseph Dalton Hooker (1817-1911), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Oil from the root of spikenard, or nard, was used extensively for making perfumes in the ancient world. Pliny refers to wreaths made from spikenard leaves, but as he says they were scented and as he lists at least six different plants under the term 'nard', it is unclear exactly which plant he was referring to. Imported Indian nard was expensive, so it was not a common plant for wreaths. According to Pliny, 'The wreath considered the most luxurious is made of nard leaves' (*Natural Histories*, 21.8; cf.12.26) and Martial mentions 'a wreath of woven roses, or costly nard' (*Epigrams*, 13.51).

5.7. Leaves used in wreaths: Olive

Forest & Kim Starr, CC BY 3.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>, via Wikimedia Commons

Olive wreaths were originally used as prizes in the Olympic Games, but are sometimes mentioned in other contexts (eg Tertullian, *On the Crown*, 14). Dreaming of wreaths made from olive or date-palm foretold marriage for women 'due to their being woven, and foretell children who will live a long time as they are evergreens'; olive foretold a daughter, and the date-palm a son. Olive wreaths could also foretell wealth for the poor and honour for those seeking public office and athletes; if slaves dreamt of them in could mean freedom in their future 'for wreaths are particular to free men' (Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica*, 1.77).

5.8. Flowers used in garlands and wreaths: Rose

Hedge rose

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Roses were one of the most common type of flower used for wreaths. Their depiction in art suggests red and pink roses were preferred, and literary references often describe them as red, including 'dazzling scarlet' (Venantius Fortunatus, *Poems*, poem

8.6), a 'brilliant fiery colour' and 'a less brilliant red' (Pliny, *Natural Histories,* 21.10). The roses are described as ranging from ones with five petals (like wild roses) to a 'hundred-petalled' type, although Pliny reports that some people said 'that the hundred-petalled variety is never put into wreaths except at the ends where these are as it were hinged together, since neither in perfume nor in appearance is it attractive' (*Natural Histories,* 21.10). The early Christian writer Clement recorded that rose wreaths were 'mildly cooling' and helped to both prevent and relieve headaches (*The Instructor*, 2.8).

It was not good if sick people dreamt of rose wreaths since 'due to their tendency to wither' it could foretell death; likewise it could foretell exposure to people in hiding according to the logic that it was impossible to conceal the smell of the roses (Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica*, 1.77).

5.9. Flowers used in wreaths: Lily

According to Pliny, 'the lily comes nearest to the rose in fame' (*Natural Histories,* 21.11). 'The flower is of an exceeding whiteness, fluted on the outside, narrow at the bottom, and gradually expanding in width … the lips curve outwards and upwards all round; the slender pistil and stamens, the colour of saffron, stand upright in the centre' (Pliny, *Natural Histories,* 21.11). He also mentions an autumn-blooming purple variety called the *narcissus*, but the modern identification of this plant is uncertain (*Natural Histories,* 21.12).

5.10. Flowers used in wreaths: Violet

Zeynel Cebeci, CC BY-SA 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons

These were the third most favoured flower after the rose and lily. There were 'several kinds: the purple, the yellow, the white' although 'of the cultivated violets, the most highly esteemed is the yellow variety' (Pliny, *Natural Histories,* 21.14). Pliny also said that 'placed on the heads in wreaths, or even just smelt, they disperse the after-effects of drinking and its headaches.' Writing sometime from the mid-second to the early third century, Artemidorus pointed that dreaming of 'wreaths of violets are good when seen while [the violets] are in season, but grievous when out of season, and in this [latter] category, wreaths of white violets signify obvious and conspicuous difficulties, those made from saffron less conspicuous, and those of purple violets also signify death' (*Oneirocritica*, 1.77).

5.11. Flowers used in wreaths: Narcissus

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Dioscorides describes the narcissus as having white petals and a saffron-coloured centre, but both he and Pliny also mention a purple version (Dioscorides, *On Medical Materials*, 4.158; Pliny, *Natural Histories*, 21.12). Clement said it had 'a heavy smell' that made the nerves lethargic (*The Instructor*, 2.8). To dream of wearing a wreath made from narcissi was bad for every-one but particularly so for those who made their living directly or indirectly from water, or those who were about to set sail, due to the fact that in the myths the youth Narcissus was so obsessed by his own image seen in a pool of water that he starved to death (Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica*, 1.77).

5.12. Flowers used in wreaths: Cyclamen

gailhampshire from Cradley, Malvern, U.K, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Pliny mentions that 'its flower, Colossae-purple in colour, is used to make up wreaths' (Pliny, *Natural Histories,* 21.27). Colossae was a town in modern Turkey that was famous for wool dyed a pink-purple colour using the cyclamen plant. As a late-flowering plant, it was a useful source of flowers for wreaths during the autumn. He also says that they plant should be grown in even home 'if it true that evil spells can do no harm wherever it grows (*ibid.,* 25.67).

5.13 Flowers used in wreaths: Saffron crocus

Юрий Данилевский, CC BY-SA 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons

Pliny records that wreaths made of saffron relieved the effects of drunkenness but also that they were not used for wreaths, because the leaves were too narrow (*Natural Histories* 21.81; 21.17). Their 'mild and gentle smell' helped send people who had drunk too much into a gentle sleep (Plutarch, *Moralia*, Table Talk, book 3, question 1; see also Clement, *The Instructor,* 2).

5.14. Flowers used in wreaths: Marjoram

Stefan.lefnaer, CC BY-SA 4.0 >, via Wikimedia Commons

According to the poet Catullus marjoram was sometimes used in a wreath worn by a bride: 'crown your brow with fragrant flowers of scented marjoram' (*Wedding-poem of Vinia and Manlius*). The second-century scholar Festus mentions in his explanation of the word for a 'small wreath' that a bride wore one under her mantle, made from flowers, the branches of aromatic shrubs of the type used in religious ceremonies (such as bay laurel, olive and myrtle) and herbs that she had picked herself (*On the Meaning of Words*, 63). It seems there was no specific form of bridal wreath, and in fact most depictions of Roman brides do not show them wearing one. Bridegrooms, having bare heads, were more likely to wear a wreath; Statius describes one as having 'now roses, now intertwined violets and lilies' on his brow (*Silvae*, 1.2.21-3; see also Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 4.27).

5.15 Flowers used in wreaths: Immortelles

Immortelles (modern *helichrysum arenarium*)
Joy-of-Nature - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia commons

In the ancient world this plant was sometimes called aramanth, being lumped in with the purple-flowering plant of that name probably because both were 'everlasting' plants, with flowers that dried well. Dioscorides said it was used to crown statues (*On Medical Matters*, 4.57), while a wreath made from a related type of *helichrysum* was found in a grave in Egypt, and Artemidorus notes that dreaming of wearing a wreath made from this flower was not good for sick people since the flower was 'dedicated either to the dead or the gods'. On the other hand, such a dream was good news for some-one being tried in a court of law (Artemidorus *Oneirocritica*, 1.77).

5.16. Flowers used in wreaths: other small flowers

Rosemary

Sweet clover

Rosemary: David J. Stang, CC BY-SA 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons; Sweet clover: Douglas Goldman, CC BY-SA 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons

The Romans used a number of leafy plants with small flowers for wreaths, such as rosemary, wild marjoram, sweet clover (melilot), hawthorn and thyme (both 'the pale and the dark'). Dreaming of wearing a wreath of thyme or sweet clover foretold trouble and foreign travel – unless you were a doctor, in which case it was a good omen (Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica*, 1.77).

Hawthorn: Pliny, *Natural Histories,* 21.39; rosemary: Dioscorides, *On Medical Materials*, 3.75; sweet clover: Pliny, *Natural Histories,* 21.28; 21.37; thyme: Pliny, *Natural Histories,* 21.31; wild marjoram: Pliny, *Natural Histories,* 21.28; 21.30; Dioscorides, *On Medical Materials*, 3.39

Hawthorn

5.17. Other leaves and flowers used in garlands and wreaths

Mrytle leaves

A list, not exhaustive, of some other plants that have been identified as having been used in garlands and wreaths. There are others where the modern identity of the plant is uncertain.

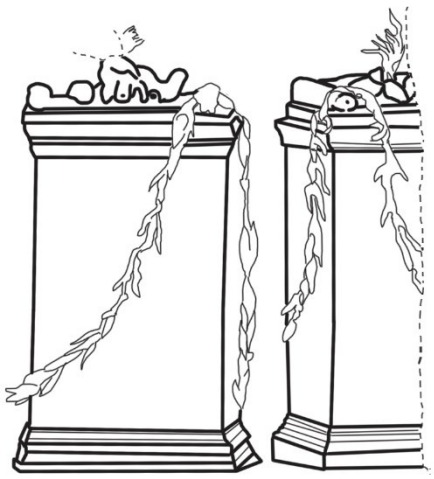
Anemone (Pliny, *Natural Histories,* 21.94)
Bergamot mint leaves (Dioscorides, *On Medical Materials*, 3.41). Good for headaches
Broom/greenweed (Pliny, *Natural Histories,* 21.27)
Cypress flower (Plutarch, *Moralia*, Table Talk, book 3, question 1; Clement, *The Instructor,* 2.8). Helps promote good sleep
Fennel (giant) leaves (Pliny, *Natural Histories,* 21.30)
Gladiolus (Pliny, *Natural Histories,* 21.38)
Hyacinth (Pliny, *Natural Histories,* 21.38); although others have identified this as delphinium, gladiolus or martagon-lily

Iris (Pliny, *Natural Histories,* 21.39)
Myrtle leaves (Tertullian, *On the Crown*, chapter 14). Helped to repress the fumes of wine (Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists*, 15.17)
Oleander flowers (Pliny, *Natural Histories,* 21.27), although alternative identifications are rosebay or rhododendron have been suggested)
Rose champion (possibly modern Lychnis coronaria) 'the flower is like that of gillyflower, somewhat purple, and it is plaited into the garlands' (Dioscorides, *On Medical Materials*, 3.100)
Southernwood (Pliny, *Natural Histories,* 21.34). He lists this under leaves used for wreaths, but possibly the flowers 'of a pleasant but heavy scent and of a golden colour' were also used.
Smilax leaves (Pliny, *Natural Histories,* 21.28)
Trefoil leaves (various plants in pea family). There were three types, one having 'a larger leaf than the other kinds, that the wreath-makers use' (Pliny, *Natural Histories,* 21.30)
Water-mint leaves (Pliny, *Natural Histories,* 21.33)
Winter cherry 'Wreath-makers use it in plaiting their wreaths' (Dioscorides, *On Medical Materials*, 4.71)

6. GARLAND USED ON ALTARS

Sometimes altars are shown decorated with garlands, usually made of leaves. They are depicted on altars being used for both animal sacrifices and thanksgiving sacrifices (of incense and wine), and it is unclear if they were only decorated for specific occasions or if it was a matter of personal choice, although one altar from Carnuntum had a red and blue garland painted on its side as a permanent feature. They could be attached to the shaft of the altar just below the capital or draped over the top.

6.1. Garlands used on altars: long diagonal garland



Detail from a relief of a double suovetaurilia *(sacrifice of an ox, sheep and cow) with two altars side by side, each draped with a very long diagonal garland.*
First century, Rome, now in the Louvre, Paris (for the full relief see https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010250007).

These show a long, thin, leaf garland, hooked over the top corner of the altar, creating a long diagonal swag on at least two faces of the altar. The side by side (or back to back) altars on the relief in the Louvre suggest there was a diagonal swag on all four sides.

6.2. Garlands used on altars: draped swags on at least two sides

Altar in scene 85 on Trajan's Column
C. Cichorius *Die Reliefs der Traianssäule, via Wikimedia Commons*

This form had U-shaped swags on at least two sides of the altar, and probably on all four sides. The garland was draped over the top corners of the altar. A sacrifice in scene 85 on Trajan's column shows a simple, thin leaf garland, where all the leaves point in the same direction, draped across the corners of the altar.

6.3. Garlands used on altars: draped swags on at least two sides

An altar being used during an animal sacrifice depicted in Scene 86 on Trajan's column shows a narrow, leaf garland hung from the top of the altar on at least two sides, but with vertical hangers at either end made with ribbed cloth ribbons that spilt in two at the ends.

Scene 86 from Trajan's Column
C. Cichorius *Die Reliefs der Traianssäule, via Wikimedia Commons*

Scene 99 from Trajan's Column
C. Cichorius *Die Reliefs der Traianssäule, via Wikimedia Commons*

An altar used in a later sacrifice (Scene 99 on Trajan's Column) has a thicker garland and a different form of hangers at either end. On these thicker garlands the leaves are symmetrical (ie pointing in different directions from either end and meeting in the middle).

6.4. Garlands used on altars: long diagonal garland

An altar with a diagonal swag attached under the capital of the altar. Late fourth-century ivory Symmachi Panel, showing a priestess with an ivy wreath burning incense at the altar. Victoria and Albert Museum, London
(for complete panel see https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70084/the-symmachi-panel-diptych-leaf-unknown/)

Some altars had the garland attached underneath their slightly projecting capital. The altar on the Symmachi Panel has a thick diagonal garland of oak leaves, the two opposing sections of the garland connecting at the middle with a single flower. The two ends of the garland are attached with long ribbons of ribbed cloth, with their ends split into two. This form of ribbon is a recurrent design on swags.

6.5. Garlands used on altars: draped swags on at least two sides

An altar with an impressive fire burning on its top, with a thick garland hung in swags on at least two sides, tied under the capital. From a relief in the Antiquities Museum of Stockholm Palace
(for the full relief see https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Stockholm_-Antikengalerie_Opferszene.jpg*)*

6.6. Garlands used on altars: flowers

An altar with carved garlands on either side, in the position real garlands would be hung under the capital. The designs of the garlands are different on either side, but both are shown tied with ribbons. Altar from Temple of Antenociticus, Benwell, now in Great North Museum: Hancock, Newcastle
Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums

A garland carved on the side of an altar from Benwell has what is likely to be stylised roses, with one large central flower and two smaller ones on either side, with leaves between them.