

Symbolism in *The Hunger Games*

Fire

Fire plays different roles throughout the story, but most often it represents Katniss. Notably, fire is the element that gives the various outfits Cinna designs for Katniss their character. Her first dress, for example, is covered in synthetic flames, while later outfits use fire more subtly but still maintain it as a motif. Katniss's fire dress earns her the epithet "the girl who was on fire," and this title comes to pertain to more than just her dress. After Katniss's surprisingly high training score is announced, Haymitch explains that they must have liked her "heat." Cinna calls her "the girl who was on fire" again, this time using "fire" to refer to Katniss's spirit and temperament. During the Games, the phrase takes on a literal meaning after Katniss is struck in the leg by a fireball and thinks the Gamemakers must be laughing at "the girl who was on fire."

Flowers/Plants

Whether or not you've seen the movie or read the book, you probably know that *The Hunger Games* is a dystopian story of competition and survival in a post-apocalyptic world. Much of the narrative takes place in the wilderness, a setting that comes with its own cast of characters: plants. The book (not so much the film) is a wonderful collection of ethnobotanical references. Flowers that heal, trees that feed, and berries that kill—plants are the ally and the enemy.

Author Suzanne Collins considered the significance of the wild plant when she scripted a food-insecure world, and her characters are often defined by a plant—some can identify

them (they live), others can't (they die). Collins has even named several major characters for plants that symbolize them. And, in the months since *The Hunger Games* premiered on screen, there has been a renewed appetite for foraging and wild plant literacy. A high school in Texas was inspired to introduce a [course](#) on plant identification and foraging, and there have been a number of Hunger Games-inspired [recipes](#), many of which include plants mentioned in the book.

Without further ado, a list of several significant plants in *The Hunger Games*. To readers who aren't familiar with the story, two warnings: first, [SPOILER ALERT] the list contains some spoilers. Second, beware the deadly nightlock berry!

Katniss

Katniss Everdeen, the story's heroine and champion forager is named for a plant. Hardy, valuable, and sometimes sweet, the katniss plant is also an adaptable survivor, just like the character. Also known as duck potato and swan potato, the plant is sometimes called "arrowhead," derived from the Latin name for its genus: *Sagittaria*, which refers to the archer in the zodiac—a master with the bow and arrow, just like the young protagonist.

In the wild, the katniss plant is found in wetlands. Its leaves are edible, though it's most valued for its roots: large, nutritious tubers whose taste is comparable to a sweet potato. Katniss was once a staple food of Native Americans, especially in the Northwest (where they dug up the plant with their toes). Of the 30 katniss species, *Sagittaria latifolia* is most prevalent in North America.

Primrose

Primrose Everdeen, Katniss's gentle sister, is most likely named for the evening primrose, *Oenothera spp*, a plant that Collins describes as beautiful and delicate. Like the character, primrose flowers are not all that hardy—they're not at the Games either.

The evening primrose is a medicinal plant, called "king's-cure-all, and a softening agent, both of which reflect Primrose's character in the story. The flowers will thrive in forsaken land, just like the young girl—except in regions west of the Rockies, which is where the story's "Capitol" is likely located—and also where the character herself dies.

Rue

The rue plant (*Ruta*) is an evergreen "herb-of-grace" that carries many metaphors. It's been called the plant of purity and it is featured in many cultural and religious ceremonies. In literature, it has been used as a symbol of both regret and freedom. And so it is an apt name for the young girl who befriends Katniss during the games, whose death serves as a turning point in the narrative. When Rue is killed, Katniss's regret becomes a sense of freedom, prompting her to launch the critical rebellion.

Pond Lilies

"Tomorrow I'll stay here, resting, camouflaging my backpack with mud, catching some of those little fish I saw as I sipped, digging up the roots of the pond lilies to make a nice meal."

Katniss's survival plan sounds very pleasant—a picnic by the lily pond. Collins does not mention the species, so the lilies of *The Hunger Games* could be any species of the most common three genera—*Nuphar*, *Nymphaea*, and *Nelumbo*, all of which have edible rhizomes. Pond lily roots are enormous, spongy, and sold in many street markets (think of the lotus root, which the Chinese call a "cooling" food, thought to restore balance in the body).

Dandelions

"I had just turned away from Peeta Mellark's bruised face when I saw the dandelion and I knew hope wasn't lost. I plucked it carefully and hurried home. I grabbed a bucket and Prim's hand and headed to the Meadow and yes, it was dotted with the golden-headed weeds. After we'd harvested those, we scrounged along inside the fence for probably a mile until we filled the bucket with the dandelion greens, stems and flowers."

In the story, the dandelion becomes a symbol of hope for Katniss, and evidence of her resourcefulness and expert foraging. When she sees the field of dandelions, she gains confidence in her ability to feed her family. Dandelions are entirely edible—to a forager, a dandelion field means something entirely different than what it means to the gardener. Dandelion leaves have more beta carotene than carrots and more iron than spinach. The root can be applied as an herbal remedy for a number of ailments and the milky sap can soothe bee stings and blisters.

Honeysuckle

When Katniss emerges from the tracker jacker (engineered wasp) hallucinations, she reaches for a honeysuckle to soothe her spirits and sweeten her tongue. The edible nectar can be eaten directly from the flower—remove the stamen from the bottom of the flower, and suck the nectar droplet.

Nightlock

Nightlock, the poison of the forest, doesn't actually exist, but its name is most likely derived from two living plants with similar toxicity: deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*), and poison hemlock (*Conium maculatum*). Ancient Romans used the nightshade's berries and leaves as a poison, and hemlock was famously used in the death of Socrates. In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss accurately identifies some berries that Peeta

collects to be deadly. A competitor who doesn't share Katniss's plant identification acumen later eats the nightlock's berries, with fatal consequences.

Mockingjays

The mockingjay represents defiance in the novel, with the bird's symbolism deriving initially from its origins. The mockingjay, we learn, came about as a result of a failed project by the Capitol to spy on the rebellious districts, and since then the bird has served as a reminder of this failure and the districts' recalcitrance—Katniss describes them as “something of a slap in the face to the Capitol.” The mockingjay pin Madge gives to Katniss is at first an emblem of that resistance. Later in the novel, however, the birds come to symbolize a different sort of defiance. Mockingjays become a link between Katniss and Rue, with the two using the birds to communicate. When Rue dies, Katniss decorates her body with flowers as a means of memorializing Rue, but also to defy the Capitol. When Katniss later sees mockingjays, they remind her of Rue, and that memory inevitably stirs her hatred of the Capitol and her wish to rebel, and take revenge, against it. The mockingjay consequently takes on an additional layer of symbolism, representing not only a general rebellion against the Capitol, but also Katniss's specific desire to defy it.

Bread

Bread is a symbol that is often found in the Hunger Games. The most outstanding fact is that the country, in which the story takes place, is named Panem which means bread in Latin. The famous quote “Panem et circenses” by the roman poet Juvenal points out the story of the book well. Translated this quote means “Bread and circuses”. We can conclude that the meaning of this is “Food and entertainment”. In the Capitol all the

basic needs are met. The people have enough food so entertainment is the only thing that remains for them.

The symbol of bread can be found in chapter 1 for the first time. Katniss best friend Gale bought a loaf of bread for Katniss and him which they are eating in the woods, before the reaping starts. It's expensive bakery bread which is really special for both of them. This warm loaf of bread from district 12 is a symbol of home and safety for Katniss. Later in the book it represents a memory of the woods and Gale for her.

When Peeta is chosen as the boy tribute, a memory flashes into Katniss mind. When she was younger, there was a time when her family was close to starvation. It was shortly after her father had died. She was looking for food but couldn't find any. She was close to death and had already given up when Peeta threw her two burned loaf of bread. He burned them on purpose to help Katniss. Katniss feels like she still owes Peeta for saving her life that night. That's one reason she can't kill him in the arena. The bread is Peeta's and Katniss connection from their past.

Another time, bread appears in the Capitol. Peeta shows Katniss all the kind of bread that is in their bread basket. Every district has their own kind of bread. This shows that every district is different and provides variable things. It also demonstrates that the Capitol owns all of the districts.

In chapter 18, bread appears again. After Rue's death Katniss receives a gift. It's a small loaf of bread from district 11. The people thank Katniss with this gesture and they don't want to let debts go unpaid. This time bread stands as a symbol of gratitude and brotherhood.