Look sharp and bring back the buttonhole

FINE AND DANDY

A flower in a man's lapel suggests great style. Isn't it time it was in fashion once more, asks **Emma Inglis**

It always surprises me that more men don't wear buttonholes. Especially those fellows with considerable gardens who have all sorts of beauties that they could pop into their lapels. It seems a great shame. After all, when it comes to personal style, nothing compares to the panache of a carefully chosen boutonnière. A single flower worn in the lapel of a man's jacket says much about his individuality, playfulness, and openness to nature's beauty.

Those who don't believe me should close their eyes and imagine a buttonhole in their jacket. Any flower from the garden or hedgerow will do. See! You've already joined the ranks of a distinguished clique of style-conscious, dapper gentlemen. Men like the arbiter of Regency fashion, Beau Brummel; the British statesman William Gladstone; the poet and playwright Oscar Wilde, and Hollywood stars such as Gary Cooper, Gene Kelly, David Niven, Fred Astaire, Humphrey Bogart and Cary Grant.

It's anyone's guess why wearing something so beautiful went out of fashion. I blame off-the-peg suits, a dwindling number of tailors – a suit or jacket must have certain features sewn into it to accommodate a boutonnière – and the rise of trend-driven fashion designers. Today, the buttonhole is mainly reserved for wedding attire, and even then etiquette dictates that it is the preserve of the men in the bridal party.

The origins of the buttonhole are obscure. There's a charming story that it was the romantic gesture of Prince Albert to Queen Victoria that started the trend. On their first wedding anniversary, the Queen presented the Prince Consort with a small bouquet as a token of her love. The infatuated Albert was allegedly so overwhelmed that he cut a slit in the lapel of his coat on the spot to affix it, an act of devotion if ever there was one.

My dear late father, who often wore a cornflower or carnation in his lapel, told me that warring medieval knights wore flowers on their armour during the Wars of the Roses, to identify themselves and their comrades on the field of battle: different flowers indicated different allegiances. I've also read that the tradition dates to the Ancient Greeks, who wore flowers pinned to their tunics to ward off evil spirits.

GLORY YEARS

Whatever its beginnings, the buttonhole reached the peak of its popularity in the 19th century, driven by the craze for floriography – a practice between lovers of using flowers to secretly communicate, with each flower meaning something specific. By the turn of the century, the boutonnière was the accoutrement du jour amongst the well-to-do, and any chap who cared a jot about his dress did not feel properly clad without one.

A decade later, millions of men were killed in the First World War. Yet despite the horrors of those years, the buttonhole survived. Indeed, soldiers marching through the poppy fields of Flanders picked the flowers and wore them in their tunics.

The fortunes of the buttonhole got a boost during the Fifties as the neo-Edwardian aesthetic evoked some of the glamour of the Belle Époque. A buttonhole frequently adorned the lapel of the voguish Duke of Windsor (wonderfully styled with a carnation 'Alibaba' in Netflix series *The Crown*) and became a key signature amongst Hollywood stars. In fact, buttonholes were worn so regularly around this time that society London florist Moyses Stevens used to prepare a board of ready-made boutonnières for sale every morning.

But that was then. Now the buttonhole is hardly ever seen. Yes, the senior royals still like to wear them at race meetings and occasionally a rapper might pop a lily in his lapel for the Met Gala – but few men chance their arm anymore and regularly wear them. It's time to press the reset button. And what better person to do that than the gardener? For he already has a passion for plants and understands the spirit and splendour of flowers. His enthusiasm will be infectious, and this will drive the comeback.

SIMPLY DOES IT

But what flower to wear and how to wear it? Far be it from me to dictate. Wear what you want, declares Umberto Angeloni in his book on the subject, *The Boutonniere: Style in One's Lapel*. "The simpler the better – to me the best boutonnière looks as though you just walked by a field of daisies and plucked one," says David Stark, floral designer to the stars, in the same book.

"I like gathered bunches of dried flowers, which look so textural and detailed, and last for weeks," says Vic Brotherson from London florist Scarlet & Violet, who advises against the comedy buttonhole, such as the sunflower.

Melissa Richardson, owner of London flower shop, JamJar Flowers, agrees. "Little posies are very in, and dried flowers, like helichrysum or straw flowers, which don't require wiring, are great." She's also a fan of the buttonhole classic – the carnation.

"It was one of the most fashionable flowers of the early 20th century and a favourite of Constance Spry. Not surprising as it is extremely robust and doesn't flag even after a long day of carousing. After a spell in the fashion wilderness, it's now creeping back into vogue. There are many new species which are marvellously pretty, including delicate clove-scented spray carnations that make great buttonholes."

It's spring, so find flowers that are wild, fresh and hedgerow-y, advises Alison Lythgoe from international floral designer McQueens. "Tie together a bluebell flower, forget-me-nots, snowdrops and add some grape hyacinths for fragrance." If you just want a single bloom, Victoria thinks a camellia flower picked from the garden would look good in a buttonhole right now.

Florists caution against the floppy flower. "There's nothing worse than a well-dressed man with a limp flower in their buttonhole," says Richardson. Quite a few flowers will require wiring to keep them perky. Wiring a flower isn't as fiddly as you may think, and any helpful florist will show you how.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Having chosen your flower, you'll then need to check your suit, sports jacket or blazer's buttonhole. This is found on the left lapel, a 1-1.5in opening that is a vestige of when a man's jacket lapels were buttoned to protect his neck.

While most jackets feature a working buttonhole, you may find yourself with one that is sewn shut. It may be better to err on the side of caution and have a seamstress open it for you. Chances are you'll also need a silk latch sewn 1-2in on the underside of the buttonhole, to securely hold the stem.

Keep other accessories restrained. Be prepared for comments, which will range from polite interest to fascination. The temptation to resort to thievery and pinch a bloom from hotel lobby vases, private gardens and public parks will be keen. If you do pilfer, don't bother taking a tulip. They're too delicate. Now go out there, carry a little piece of garden around in your coat and bring back the buttonhole.

WILDFLOWERS, DRIED STRAW FLOWER & PINK PEPPERCORNS

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DRIED STRAW FLOWER & BUNNY TAIL GRASS

'I like gathered bunches of dried flowers, which look so textural and detailed, and last for weeks'

FOLLOWERS OF FASHION Oscar Wilde, top, and Fred Astaire, above, were both keen on the boutonnière

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