



Chickweed, Willow and other Wild Glaswegians

Louise Bustard

If our ancestors were to return now not only would all the plants in our gardens be alien to them but they would be astonished at our inability to appreciate plants that were, to them, crucial within everyday life.



It is up to all of us to ensure that as part of Glasgow's diverse floral heritage they continue to grow here for a long time yet.

*“In the garden more grows,
than the gardener sows”*

Anon






Introduction

by Louise Bustard

Assistant Curator Glasgow Botanic Gardens


When I first arrived in Glasgow almost a decade ago it would have been easy to view it as a concrete jungle like all other major cities. It wasn't very long though before I encountered some old friends. They completely covered a high bank close to where I live in the east end. The huge swathe of dusky pink flowers reminded me of my home town - London. Those dusky pink flowers were the rosebay willow-herb and they took me back to a time when, as a little girl, I sat listening to my grandmother as she told me of the first summer after World War Two had ended. It was nothing short of a miracle that, after the blitz, St Paul's Cathedral remained standing proud and virtually untouched surrounded by - nothing. Every home, shop, church and garden had been bombed to oblivion. St Paul's stood alone. As the summer got under way, however, the surrounding bombsites turned dusky pink as newly arrived and long hidden seeds of the rosebay willow-herb gradually covered the open wounds of the city. Through my grandmother's descriptive powers I can still visualise in my mind an extraordinary sight that my eyes never saw.

Whilst researching the 'Chickweed, Willow & other wild Glaswegians' I came across the similar story of the Singer Sewing Machine factory at Clydebank that was destroyed by bombing raids during World War Two and whose ruins too were clothed in the rosebay willow-herb.



As a result, many locals, to this day still refer to the plant as the 'singer weed'. For me these two stories create a bond between the two great cities that I call home.

There are many identification guides to the wild plants of Scotland and local areas within Scotland. This is not another. The information within this guide is about the relationship between Scots, especially Glaswegians, and the plants that grow around them. The plants discussed are those that were used or had folklore or superstition attached to them. The majority of them had a medicinal use - even the poisonous ones. Some of the remedies worked, some were superstitions handed down through generations. Some would be so old as to result from a belief in "The Doctrine of Signatures." This theory, prevalent in the Medieval period, took as its basis the idea that God gave each plant a visual indication of its use to mankind. Thus, anything with a heart shaped leaf would be used for heart-related problems, either physical symptoms of heart disease or those problems of a more romantic nature. Those plants with yellow sap would be used in cases of jaundice etc., etc. Consequently none of the remedies discussed in these pages should be used without first consulting a qualified doctor.



The reader may regard many of the plants as weeds. Few would welcome nettles or docks in their garden today. If our ancestors were to return now not only would all the plants in our gardens be alien to them but they would be astonished at our inability to appreciate plants that were, to them, crucial within everyday life. It saddens me when I take groups of schoolchildren around the herb garden and the vegetable beds at the Botanic Gardens in Glasgow how few of them are able to connect the plants they are looking at with the food they eat on a daily basis.

The central feature in the New Herb Garden at Glasgow Botanic Gardens is the Scottish bed. All the plants within it have been used by Scots for centuries. Many of the plants discussed in these pages can be found growing there. You may also find them growing out of a garden wall, between paving stones, inside a gutter, on derelict ground, in a neglected garden or up on the Campsies. You can be sure that they will be somewhere in Partick, Pollok, Castlemilk, Cardonald, Maryhill, Millerston, Knightswood and Nitshill. The one thing all the plants have in common is that whilst none of them is unique to Glasgow, they all grow wild in and around the city. It is up to all of us to ensure that as part of Glasgow's diverse floral heritage they continue to grow here for a long time yet.

Foreword

*by Kenny Boyle
Parks Manager*

On a fine Sunday in August 1894, 78,420 persons were counted as they entered Glasgow Green. They were simply visiting, no events were planned or recorded. The significance of this being an illustration of the scale of exposure society at large had to, what was then termed 'nature'. Trees, plants and animal life, what's now grandly termed biodiversity.

Visits to the country, parks and gardens, ostensibly for play and recreation, were in actual fact part of a collective educative process. Plants/herbs were identified, mainly for what was edible at first, then their uses, vital before the introduction of the modern health service. Louise has tapped into this almost forgotten communal pool of knowledge. This book is a timely reminder of an ethos, previously essential in day to day life, but slowly being lost to the wider public.



Rosebay Willowherb



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'The serpent will go through fire, rather than through the leaves of the ash'

Ash

Fraxinus excelsior

There are many superstitions associated with the ash tree. In Norse mythology it is the 'World Tree' the most important of all. The numerous keys (seeds) are food for some small birds e.g. the bullfinch, spiders and beetles live in its leaf-litter and deer like to eat the buds and occasionally bark from fallen branches. It is a strong and vigorous tree. This may account for why, in rural areas of Scotland, after the birth of a baby the end of a green stick of ash was placed in a fire and the sap collected in a spoon. This was then administered to the baby. After all, if so many animals eat it, it must be good and perhaps the hope was that the sap of the tree would imbue the child with its strength and vigour.

The leaves were used as animal fodder and making dye and the keys were eaten pickled. Our ancestors recognised the qualities of the wood, strong but pliant as being ideal for making spear shafts and the rims of chariot wheels. Also tools, weapon handles, oars and ploughs. The ash responded well to coppicing.

Both the bark and sap were used to treat toothache. Throughout mainland Britain one superstition associated with ash abounds. It is said that serpents hate the tree: "The serpent will go through fire, rather than through the leaves of the ash" says an old Gaelic saying. This belief was particularly associated with areas in which adders were prevalent. A bitten limb was soaked in a preparation of ash leaves and buds.

Bramble

Rubus fruticosus

The fruits of bramble (blackberries) have traditionally been made into jam, preserves etc., as they are an excellent source of vitamin C. A strictly European practice is the fermentation of brambles to make wine. The astringent leaves and roots of the bramble, like raspberry and black currant, have been used as a treatment for diarrhoea, colds, coughs and sore throats. Bramble with pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegium*) - a member of the mint family - treated bronchitis and asthma. Erysipelas (disease causing acute skin inflammation) was managed using a poultice of bramble leaves.



Bramble



Broad-Leaved Docken

Rumex obtusifolius

This is the one medicinal plant everyone grows up knowing about. When stung by the stinging nettle you put the sap of the dock leaf on it to stop the stinging. It can also be used on bee stings. An ointment used to be made by boiling the roots then mixing them with beeswax and fresh butter. A decoction was drunk to treat scurvy and on St Kilda the leaves were eaten as greens. The leaves were also fed to cows to encourage them to stand still during milking. Docken roots provide a black dye and the leaves a yellow or brown dye.

'As their plant the people of Glasgow chose "broom"'

Broom


Cytisus scoparius

In 2004 'Plantlife' the wild plant conservation charity asked the people of Britain to pick a flower to represent each county. As their plant the people of Glasgow chose 'broom'. For centuries the banks of the River Clyde were covered in the cheerful, bright yellow flowers of the plant. So the riverbank within the city became known as 'The Broomielaw'.

Broom has a very long association with these islands. The common name 'Broom' is unusual in that it is universal throughout mainland Britain. In old English *Brom* was just a coarse shrub which would have included gorse, heather, holly and butcher's broom. All were used for sweeping at some time. Ultimately *Cytisus* proved to be the most efficient and claimed the name for itself.

It also has strong connections with British royalty. The Plantagenets took their family name from the old medieval name for the plant, *Planta genista*, chosen as his emblem by Henry II. It appears on the Great Seal of Richard I and Henry VIII was convinced of its curative qualities. After union it was on the menu at the coronation feast of James II (England), VII (Scotland). Broom buds pickled in vinegar were considered a delicacy. They were also vital to the production of beer-making to provide the bitter flavour before the introduction of hops.

Broom con't



In the 19th century an ointment was made of broom flowers, butter and elder flowers (*Sambucus nigra*) to remove sebaceous cysts; one user declared, “I have known it rot away a wen (cyst) which was bigger than a half penny loaf” (Hatfield 1999). The same ointment was used for strains, shrinking vein or sinew swellings or swellings in a cow's teat.

Broom contains the chemical sparteine which is an extremely strong diuretic. It is known to triple the output of the kidneys. It has been used throughout the British Isles in the treatment of dropsy and all kidney problems. As recently as World War II young broom tops were collected for use as a diuretic.

'For insomnia chickweed tea was recommended'

Chickweed

Stellaria media

Chickweed got its name through being an excellent food for poultry and other birds. Chickweed is a common and easily recognisable weed throughout the British Isles.

In the past when one used chickweed for medicinal purposes, it was usually applied as a poultice for abscesses and sore breasts. An ointment was made by chopping the plant up and simmering it in lard. This was then used for rheumatism, stiff joints, chilblains and rashes.

On Skye, after a fever had broken, the sufferer's feet, knees and ankles were washed with warm water and chickweed, to enable the individual to sleep. Then a warm poultice of chickweed was put on the neck and between the shoulder blades. For insomnia (and slimming) in otherwise healthy people chickweed tea was recommended.



Chickweed

'In Lanarkshire as well as other parts of Scotland, the plant colts-foot was known as 'dishyluggs''

Colts-Foot

Tussilago farfara

The common name of colts-foot is purely from the hoof-like shape of the leaf. The top surface of the leaf looks as though flour has been sprinkled on it. The underside is covered in white fluff. When dry this felt-like material smoulders well and in the past was used as tinder for lighting a fire.

The Latin name *Tussilago* comes from the stem '*tussis*' meaning a cough. The name was being used in association with the plant as far back as Roman times. This tells us that even then it was being used as a cough treatment. For centuries it has been regarded throughout Britain as *the* cure for coughs as well as colds, sore throats, catarrh and lung and chest problems. The leaves soaked in water were used in the treatment of asthma. In Roxburghshire an ointment was made from the roots and put on sprains and all swellings of joints.

In Lanarkshire as well as other parts of Scotland the plant was known as 'dishyluggs' and as recently as the 1950's was the only cough treatment some country people would use. It is ironic that for hundreds of years before tobacco arrived in this country colts-foot was commonly smoked (in later centuries using a clay pipe).

In 1749 at the age of 73, Sir John Clerk wrote in his diary that he had got into the habit of adding colts-foot to his tobacco to dilute some of the effects (of the nicotine). After indulging in this practice for a year he then noted that the addition of colts-foot had

considerably lessened the cough he had acquired some time before from smoking just tobacco.



Colts-foot



Common Couch

Elytrigia repens

Today couch is only known as a particularly difficult weed to eliminate. Since classical times, however, it was considered effective in treating kidney disorders and infections. It was so highly regarded that during World War II couch-grass roots were collected by the National Herb Committee for use as a mild diuretic.

Common Knapweed

Centaurea nigra

This thistle-like plant is also known as 'Hardheads' because the hard heads and stems were used like conkers in the game of 'sojers' (soldiers). The entire plant was used in the production of yellow, green, bright green and dark brown dyes.

'The common ragwort is hated by the keepers of livestock'

Common Ragwort

Senecio jacobaea

This plant is hated by the keepers of livestock, particularly cattle and horses. They will not deliberately eat the plant when it is living but they will eat it once it has dried up after death. Either way, if the animal eats the plant it will die a painful death from cirrhosis of the liver.

Interestingly, there are virtually no records of the common ragwort having been used in England. There seem to have been numerous uses for it in Ireland and a few in Scotland. On Skye and Colonsay the plant was cut up, mixed with butter and applied warm to a boil to bring it to a head and 'draw' it quickly and painlessly.



Common Knapweed

'Nettles were regularly eaten in spring to purify the blood after a long winter'


Common or Stinging Nettle

Urtica dioica

This is the one British wild plant that everyone knows. A single encounter is all it takes to embed the plant within one's memory forever. The tingling can linger for several days. The Romans based in Britain deliberately flayed themselves with nettles to warm themselves in this cold, damp, rheumatic land. The British have had a love/hate relationship with this plant for thousands of years. In past times if not loved it was highly respected and appreciated for the multitude of uses people had for it. Following in the footsteps of the Romans it was still used into the 20th century by some people who gained relief from arthritis by stinging themselves on the joints.

Nettles grow in phosphate-rich soils. So they associated themselves with human beings. Wherever you find people phosphates occur in abundance: in cattle-pens, latrines, graveyards, rubbish-dumps and fire-sites. Phosphates can remain in the soil for extremely long periods and phosphate-lovers e.g. cleavers, elder as well as nettles mark the sites of ancient human habitation. In the Highlands nettle-clumps can still be found around ruined old crofts which had no internal sanitation.

Nettles were regularly eaten in spring to purify the blood after a long winter. A nettle soup was made using the young tender shoots finely chopped and mixed with oatmeal. It was also considered useful in the treatment of rheumatism, indigestion, coughs and for stimulating a lost appetite.



We have a tendency today to disregard the knowledge of our ancestors as mere superstition. Only when modern science proves the facts do we sit up and take notice. Yet we forget that those who came before us lived much more closely with the plants and animals that surrounded them. Whilst some things may stem from superstition, in the main their knowledge was gained by observation. On seeing the funeral of a young girl, the mermaid of the Clyde remarked:

If they wad drink nettles in March
And eat muggins in May
Sae many braw maidens
Wadna gang to clay

This is good advice because nettles are at their best and safest in March. They become toxic when ingested later in the year. It has been known for centuries that nettles are haemostatic i.e. they help stop excessive blood loss and were often used to check nose-bleeds. They contain a readily available source of iron making them effective in the treatment of anaemia caused by very heavy periods.

Common or Stinging Nettles con't



In support of the mermaid of the Clyde a rhyme from Chambers' *Popular Rhymes of Scotland* advises:

Gin ye be for lang kail
Cou' the nettle. Stoo the nettle
Gin ye be for lang kail
Cou' the nettle ear

People were also aware in the past that the active ingredients in many plants are more concentrated in the morning, and in the spring and in those grown in shade rather than full sun.

It has recently hit the headlines that an Italian fashion house has started to produce a range of jeans and jackets made of nettle fibre. As the old saying tells us “there is nothing new under the sun”. Soldiers in Napoleon's army wore uniforms of nettle fibre. During the First World War Germany and Austria ran out of cotton and so in 1915 1.3 million kilograms of nettle fibre was collected (entirely from wild grown sources). The problem was that it took 40 kilograms to make just one shirt. Then in the Second World War Britain looked into the possibility of manufacturing nettle fibres but in the end nettles were used only for extracting chlorophyll and as a dye for camouflage nets. This was following in the footsteps of work done in the Western Isles where nettles were used to make dyes particularly used in the making of Harris Tweed.



'A fresh bunch of stinging nettles will keep a larder free of flies'

Nettles are not only useful to humans. Although no quadruped (except the donkey) will touch nettles whilst they are growing, they are relished once the plant has been cut down and wilted. More than 40 species of insect and many small birds live around nettles. Some species e.g. the Red Admiral and Small Tortoiseshell butterfly larvae and the nettle weevil exist solely in the nettle patch. During the winter months aphids collect among the nettle leaves and are then picked off by blue-tits in the spring. Despite being attractive to so many insects, flies dislike nettles. A fresh bunch of stinging nettles will keep a larder free of flies.

Common Whitebeam

Sorbus aria

The whitebeam prefers growing on chalky soils and so is more common in England than Scotland. The round red fruits are relished by birds and squirrels alike because they have more pulp than the rowan fruits. They can be made into jam and wine. The timber of whitebeam is very hard, fine-grained and white. It is ideal for wood-turning and fine joinery. Its hardness made it an excellent wood for making cog-wheels and other machinery parts. The whitebeam has a propensity for producing highly localised endemic species. All show subtle differences in habit, shape, height and colour of leaves and fruit. Two are found on the island of Arran: the Arran service tree *Sorbus pseudofennica* and *Sorbus arranensis*.



Common Whitebeam

'The young leaves of Cow Parsley can be pleasant and mildly aromatic when added to eggs and salad'

Cow Parsley

Anthriscus sylvestris

This is a plant that has moved around the country via roadside verges. It is found throughout Scotland except the far north west. It is in the family 'Umbelliferae' - the carrot family. This is a strange family which contains many edible plants e.g. Sweet Cicely (*Myrrhis odorata*), Chervil (*Anthriscus cerifolium*), Alexanders (*Smyrniolus atrum*) as well as one of the world's most famous poisonous plants - Hemlock (*Conium maculatum*). Compared with many of its relatives Cow Parsley has had only limited usage. This could be because, in the past, the plant was associated with the devil probably because of its hemlock associations.

The young leaves of cow parsley can be pleasant and mildly aromatic when added to eggs or salad. The young tips as well as the entire plant once produced a green or yellow-green dye used in the manufacture of Harris tweed. A hot infusion of cow parsley was found to be useful in the treatment of laminitis in horses. On Eriskay in the Outer Hebrides women crofters used a 'wild parsley' they called *tath lus* (quite possibly cow parsley) as a sedative. The dried stalks of the plant were used to fashion weaving bobbins.

'The curled docken is probably the tallest and most common docken within Scotland'

Curled Docken

Rumex Crispus

This is probably the tallest and most common docken within Scotland. It will grow almost anywhere. It can generally be used in the same way as the Broad-Leaved Docken (*Rumex obtusifolius*).

On South Uist in the Outer Hebrides curled docken was a treatment for scalds and burns. Also for bumps and bruises a leaf was applied like a plaster. Leaves soaked in whisky were applied to a cut to stop the bleeding, bandaged tightly and the dressing changed daily. A liquid made from the pulped roots in Ayrshire was considered efficacious in cleansing the blood but in the Highlands was used to prevent scurvy. The pulped root was also thought to be effective against dermatitis. The root could also be dried and ground and used when required for blood disorders.

In pre-independence North America one plant came as quite a surprise to the Europeans, and an unpleasant surprise at that. That plant was poison ivy. The colonial treatment for a bad case of poison ivy rash (and these people went to the toilet in the woods so there were some really serious cases) was curled dock boiled with vinegar and applied to the sores. The British also used the plant as a treatment for diarrhoea, which was a common problem in the New World.



Dandelion

Taraxacum spp


The dandelion is found all over the northern hemisphere but not in the southern (except where it has been introduced by man).

The familiar flowers of the Dandelion are a bright lemon-yellow and its leaves are cut into great jagged teeth thought to resemble the canine teeth of a lion, thus giving the plant its common name, an anglicised version of the French *Dent de Lion*.

The Dandelion is an important bee plant, supplying plenty of both pollen and nectar in early spring. After the petals have withered, the seeds, resembling a fluffy globe, appear and are soon mature enough to be blown from the stalk by the slightest breeze. This is the "Dandelion Clock" beloved by generations of children, who will blow upon it until all the seeds are released - telling the time of day by the number of puffs necessary to disperse every seed.

Due to its highly efficient dispersal mechanism the dandelion is hated by both farmer and gardener. Small birds, however, are extremely fond of Dandelion seeds as are pigs and goats and it is a valuable food for rabbits during spring and the breeding season. But sheep, cattle and horses won't touch it.

Dandelion con't



The dandelion is very nutritious, containing more vitamins and minerals than most vegetables and has been used as a food for centuries. It has also traditionally been used as a tonic and blood purifier, relieving constipation, inflamed skin, joint pain, eczema and liver conditions such as hepatitis and jaundice. An infusion of the root, leaves and flowers encourages the elimination of toxins from the body. It is a powerful diuretic but does not deplete the body of potassium, as many diuretics do. Dandelion sap inhibits the growth of bacteria so when used externally it will help to heal wounds.

Chinese scientists have discovered that dandelion extracts have a bactericidal effect against a number of really dangerous bacteria, including those responsible for diphtheria, tuberculosis, and pneumonia. They also control the deadly infection caused by *staphylococcus aureus* when it has invaded the body. The Chinese found that the dandelion's roots, leaves, juice, and extracts are effective in treating other infections, including chronic bronchitis and hepatitis, with few side effects.

The Chinese have been studying the medicinal uses of the dandelion longer than anyone else. Their scientific research has proven that as well as being antibacterial it also has diuretic, hypoglycaemic, antispasmodic, anticancer and antifungal effects on the body. The dandelion is mentioned in all sorts of ancient documents, including the *Pentsao* and the *Tang Materia Medica*, as both food and

‘The Chinese have been using the dandelion to treat breast cancer for more than 1,100 years’

medicine, and the Chinese have been using it to treat breast cancer for more than 1,100 years. They also use it for abscesses, appendicitis, boils, caries, dermatitis, fever, inflammation, leucorrhea, liver ailments, mastitis, scrofula and stomach aches.

Throughout the Victorian and Edwardian eras up to the Second World War 'Dandelion and Burdock' was a hugely popular soft drink. There are many producers of dandelion and burdock, which is mainly available in the north. If you see it in the south, it's usually labelled D&B. This is produced by AG Barr, which couldn't trademark the generic name dandelion and burdock so came up with this abbreviation.

This is by no means the only drink made using dandelion. Dried dandelion leaves are often employed as an ingredient in many digestive or diet drinks and herb beers. Dandelion Stout used to be a particular favourite among the workers in the industrial towns of the Midlands. Dandelion coffee is said to help keep the liver, kidneys and bowels in healthy working order.

On the 13th September 1777 Sir James Cullum wrote in his own copy of Hudson's Flora Anglica “Old Gordon the gardener informs me that he has himself experienced the chewing the dried roots (of the dandelion) a very great relief in the asthma”.



Elder

Sambucus nigra

Bour-tree, bour-tree, crookit rung,
Never straight and never strong,
Ever bush and never tree
Since our Lord was nailed t'ye'

('Bour' means pipe)

The elder has always been a paradox of a plant. Throughout the ages it has been revered and it has been despised. It is too small to be classed as a tree yet too large and open to be truly a bush. The root and heartwood are exceptionally hard and yet the branches are frail, hollow and filled with soft pith. The lovely umbels of white flowers smell sweet whilst the leaves have a musty, unpleasant odour like mice. Elder like the nettle, is particularly fond of rich, well-fertilised soils and can be found growing wherever man has left his detritus e.g. rubbish tips, latrines or graveyards. The Saxons believed that elder would grow only where human blood had been spilt. To many it was a tree of evil whilst to many more it was highly regarded as magical as it had so many medicinal uses. Even its name is derived from two sources. "It is compounded from the Scandinavian tree spirit Hylde-Moer and Anglo-Saxon Eldrun, derived from *aeld*, meaning fire, perhaps because the branches hollowed of their pith were used like bellows for blowing on fire, but must on no account be added to the flames" (Mabey, R. 1998). In the Middle Ages the contradictory nature of the elder needed an



'The elder became the tree from which Judas hanged himself and also the tree from which the cross was made'

explanation and so a myth developed. The elder became the tree from which Judas hanged himself and also the tree from which the cross was made. An extraordinary myth to have grown up really as no elder tree would be large enough or strong enough to accommodate either event. Nevertheless the vernacular Scots verse at the top describes some of the paradoxes.

The flowers can be eaten straight from the plant but are better known as a cordial. In the 1990's elderflower 'champagne' was very popular until a court case ensued, brought by the French Champagne Association who thought that calling the elderflower beverage 'champagne' "cheapened and debased" the reputation of real champagne. But the drink remained enormously popular within Britain and is considered one of the very best 'British country wines'. In World War Two elder flowers were packed with salt into barrels to be used as a flavouring.

The young leaves of elder start to show in late January or early February - earlier than the leaves of all other native trees - they then seem to stay frozen in time until around mid-April. Then the leaves start to re-grow. Within country tradition it is time to sow seed in the fields when the elder flowers open.

Elder con't




'The number of medical uses for elder is extraordinary'

People as well as certain insects and flies dislike the extremely unpleasant smell of the leaves and are repelled by them. This fact was utilised right up to the early twentieth century by drovers who would tie branches of leaves to their cattle and horses to give them some peace from the infuriating little creatures.

Bees and hoverflies, though, remain undeterred by the smell and feed on the flowers thereby aiding fertilisation. Some birds are very fond of the berries e.g. the robin and pigeons but many won't go near the plant.

The pith inside the young stems is one of the lightest natural solids. Commercially it is used in science laboratories. Whilst small biological specimens are cut for ultra-thin specimens to look at under the microscope, the pith is ideal for holding the specimens in place. Elder stems have provided endless entertainment for generations of children who made 'guns' and peashooters out of the hollow stems. The hollow stems were also used for making musical instruments. The hard wood produced by the main trunk was considered ideal for making certain household goods e.g. bowls, spoons and forks. The pegs used for securing thatch on roofs were made of elder wood.

The elder stands alongside the dandelion, nettle and docken in importance and diversity of use as a folk herb.



The number of medicinal uses for elder is extraordinary. The bark has been used for rheumatism, the leaves for treating eczema, and for making an ointment for treating burns; the flowers are used as the basis of a skin lotion, as well as for making wine, and the berries yield a wine with a high reputation for treating colds and flu. Today this knowledge is held by just a small number of people. In the past though everyone living in the country would have known the uses of elder, and it was in the community's interest to deter anyone from destroying it.

Some Irish legends claim that it was a branch of Elder Saint Patrick used in the form of a sacred rod to drive out all the serpents from Ireland. Often planted close to the home, the Elder was thought to offer protection against evil influences and lightning, based on the fact that the tree itself never seemed to get struck and it was hoped such immunity would extend to the nearby dwellings. It was also believed that anyone who cut the wood of this tree risked being turned into stone.

In past times almost every part of the elder tree was used in some way; the taboo on cutting it and burning it could simply result from the value of this plant. Also it does not burn well. It was long believed that an elder planted by windows and doors kept evil spirits away - well, it certainly kept the flies away!



Eyebright

Euphrasia officinalis

This plant is a semi-parasite on grassland throughout Scotland. It has a tendency to produce readily hybrids which are very localised. Consequently there are many 'varieties' unique to Scotland. It acquired its name from the flowers which are said to look like shining eyes. So following in the wake of the 'Doctrine of Signatures' it was used along with milk and cold tea as a decoction as an eyewash. In Scotland the plant was infused in milk then applied to the patient's eye using a feather.

Fairy Flax

Linum catharticum

Archaeologists in Britain have excavated evidence of *Linum catharticum* from sites in Britain dating as far back as the late Bronze Age usually in areas associated with cultivation. This is usually an indication of medicinal usage. In the case of the 'Fairy Flax' we know that it has been used throughout Britain as a purgative and emetic for a very long time. Along the western Celtic fringe of the British Isles it was well-known as a cure for menstrual abnormalities. In the Highlands and on Skye its Gaelic name *lus miosach* means 'menstrual plant'. It was also such a powerful purgative that it was described as suitable "only for very robust strong constitutions".

'False oat grass was said to make a wonderful ale which never caused drunkenness'

False Oat Grass

Arrhenatherum elatius

This was once extremely valuable in the Orkney Isles. This was a useful grass as it grew and ripened quickly and apparently produced a good loaf of bread. Perhaps, even more usefully, it was said to make a wonderful ale which never caused drunkenness.



Eyebright

'Fat hen was a common vegetable in Bronze Age Scotland'

Fat Hen

Chenopodium album

The common names of many plants (particularly those names originating in rural areas) tell us what they were used for. It was probably the large fatty seeds that both humans and livestock enjoyed. It has been growing in Britain since prehistoric times. Archaeological evidence shows that fat hen was a common vegetable in Bronze Age Scotland. It remained popular right up to the introduction of spinach (which is a close relative anyway). The plant has a pleasant flavour whether eaten raw or cooked, reminiscent of kale or broccoli.

The plant is particularly partial to growing on dung-heaps and in this context there are many places named after it in England, demonstrating that it must have been an important food. There is a record of its being added to soup in Ayrshire in the early 20th century. This is not surprising as the plant is very nutritious being full of vitamins.



Feverfew



Feverfew

Tanacetum parthenium

The common name of this plant is derived from *febrifuge*, which means "fever breaking". Apart from cooling a feverish person down, chewing the root produces a hot sensation in the mouth.


There is a legend of how it acquired its specific Latin name - *parthenium*: it is said that one of the builders working on the construction of the Parthenon on the Acropolis in Athens fell from the roof. He was given feverfew which saved his life.

A relative newcomer to these islands the plant reached Britain from the Balkans in the early Middle Ages. Today it's generally found in the wild state near very old gardens and walls. The ancient magi ordered "Feverfew to be pulled from the ground with the left hand, and the fevered patient's name must be spoken forth, and the herbalist must not look behind him." Another old superstition held that when it was planted around dwellings it purified the air and warded off disease.

After research carried out at the City of London Migraine Clinic it is now confirmed that taking feverfew regularly (usually in the form of capsules or tablets, although some people do eat the raw leaves) is extremely effective in preventing the onset of migraine headaches.



Feverfew con't



The active chemicals within feverfew leaves were found to prevent blood vessels in the brain from going into spasm which is the basic cause of a migraine attack.

Although the efficacy of the plant was confirmed in the 20th century, its use has been known about for thousands of years. The Greek herbalist Dioscorides is believed to have treated arthritis with this herb. In 1649 Culpeper recommended feverfew for headaches and to strengthen women's wombs. In 1772 another herbalist, John Hill, treated headaches and stated "this herb exceeds whatever else is known".

The pungent odour of the plant is greatly disliked by many insects and consequently acts as an effective deterrent. In the past feverfew leaves were placed in a linen or muslin bag and placed among clothing as a moth repellent and in bedding to deter bed bugs. It is so disliked by bees that branches of it were carried around to keep the bees at bay. Even today some people plant it within their rose beds or around the garden for pest control.

'Generations of children have amused themselves by taking a stem of horsetail apart and then putting it back together again'

Field Horsetail

Equisetum arvense

The most common British horsetail this is generally found on derelict sites where the soil has been compacted or where drainage is poor. Generations of children have amused themselves by taking a stem of horsetail apart and then putting it back together again. In parts of England this unusual structural feature has led to horsetails being called 'Lego plants'. In the 16th century another of its physical features gave it the name 'dyshwasshynges'. This is because (along with all members of the Equisetaceae) the field horsetail deposits silica crystals on its stems and leaves making the whole plant very tough and very rough. Consequently, in the 16th century it was used as an effective pot scourer. Boiled in water the horsetail produces a fungicide against mildew. That same water was used to wash wounds. In the Highlands and Western Isles the plant was used to staunch blood flow (it has been suggested that the rough surface of the plant stimulates clotting). In the Shetlands it was used to ease indigestion. Today, however, all horsetails are regarded as one of the worst weeds you can get. A weed that is virtually indestructible.

'It has long been considered unlucky in Scotland to bring foxglove flowers into the house'


Foxglove

Digitalis purpurea

Although universally known throughout Britain as foxglove the plant came to be known as 'Dead Man's Bells' in some parts of Scotland due to an old folktale that someone close to death could hear the bells of the foxglove ringing. Consequently it has long been considered unlucky in Scotland to bring foxglove flowers into the house.

The poisonous nature of the plant has been known about for centuries. In past ages the tips of hunting arrows were smeared with the juice of the plant and it was also used as an ordeal poison. The emblem of the Clan Farquharson incorporates foxgloves flowers. It was included in an official list of medicinal plants from the reign of Edward III.

William Withering, a Shropshire physician and botanist, was the first person to observe and record meticulously the effects of carefully measured amounts of dried foxglove leaves on patients suffering from dropsy (the accumulation of fluid within the body's tissues). The condition is caused by the heart not functioning properly. When 'digitalis' was used Withering noted that it acted on the heart by slowing and strengthening the heartbeat. This then stimulated the kidneys to clear the body and lungs of excess fluid.



During World War II, when it became almost impossible to import drugs into the country, large amounts of native foxglove leaves were collected by the County Herb Committees. These mostly consisted of members of the Women's Institutes.

As the poisonous nature of the plant has always been common knowledge it has only been used internally on rare occasions. In Orkney where it had been observed that foxgloves had proved fatal to geese, it was never used as a human remedy.

In many places, though, it was regularly used externally as a salve on bruises, boils, cuts and other wounds, on swellings, burns and scalds. Foxglove leaves were applied to breasts after a baby had been weaned and it dried up the flow of milk with no ill-effects. It was also sometimes used as a poultice on painful knees.

There are numerous theories about the derivation of the name 'foxglove', but one stands out above all others. It is said the mischievous fairies gave the flowers to the fox so he could creep about the chicken run unheard.



Goat Willow, Pussy Willow and Sallow

Salix caprea

Long before Linnaeus was born, the name, *Salix caprea*, was applied to these northern European willows. *Salix* was the name for willows in Rome. As the Roman influence spread through Europe and the British Isles, the name was adapted by various peoples; Anglo-Saxon as *sealh* and Gaelic-Irish as *saileach*. The Gaelic probably gave rise to the common English name, *sallow*. The Roman (Latin) name is thought to be derived from the ancient Sanskrit *salila* or water and related to *sarit*, river, since many willows are frequently found growing near water. Ironically the goat willow is one of the few willows that grows away from water.

In old gardening books, the goat willow is oddly given the name 'palm'. The 1889 *Century Unabridged Dictionary* states the palm "was adopted as an emblem of victory...The Jews carried palm-branches on festal occasions, and the Roman Catholic and Greek churches have preserved this usage" particularly on Palm Sunday. In colder climates, the dictionary states that churches allowed certain substitutions for religious celebrations, "Among plants so designated in Great Britain are chiefly the great *sallow* or goat-willow, *Salix Caprea*, at the time when its catkins are out...."

Goat willow is the commonest and most widespread in Britain. Goats and other browsing animals like to eat its leaves hence the common name 'goat willow'. 'Pussy willow' comes from the furry catkins.

'A chemical from willows 'salycin' is famously the basis of aspirin'


Once the fluff from the catkins was used as a lint for protecting and healing damaged skin.

Sallow bark tea is recommended for indigestion, whooping cough and catarrh. It can also be used as an antiseptic and disinfectant. Willow bark reduces fever and relieves rheumatism, a common ailment in these damp islands. A decoction can be used for gum and tonsil inflammations and as a footbath for smelly feet. The bark is collected in the spring time, when one has to be careful not to ring the tree or it will die. The bark can be dried, powdered and stored in an airtight container. Goat willow bark was used for tanning leather. The branches and wood were turned into hatchet, tool handles and cobblers cutting boards. It was also considered the best wood for making hurdles, cricket bats and artificial legs. Another use was in the manufacture of gun-powder and charcoal.

The traditional clothes pegs made and sold by gypsies and travellers were made from the willow. The Celts used the timber to make wheel spokes for their chariots. It also is very good to use as a divining rod for finding water.

'The Poor Man's Physician' of 1731 recommended the application of burnt willow ash to remove warts. They knew what they were doing

Willow and Sallow con't



because today salicylate (found in willows) still forms the basis of many patent wart treatments. Another chemical from willows 'salycin' is famously the basis of aspirin.

The Druids always used willow in matters of divination and justice.

“The willow's connection with justice had a later representation when a peeled wand was the rod of justice held by the Lords of the Isles. The wand was also held by the Lords when they were initiated, a practice which was continued by most major clan chiefs. A number of the tree's features and qualities could have given rise to this tradition - its appearance, its vitality, its health-renewing properties, its very important role as host to an assortment of plants and creatures, all of which could suitably symbolise the fundamental responsibilities of a lord or chief. Yet the specific feature of the peeled willow wand itself that surely symbolised the initiate's representation of truth and justice is its whiteness.” (Hugh Fife,1994).

'Sallow' is the Clan plant badge of the Cummings. The clan plant badges were adopted in order to help distinguish further between clans wearing similar and confusing tartans. The custom was revived from earlier times for the visit of George IV to Edinburgh in 1822.

*“The native Americans came to give greater plantain the name
‘English-Mans Foot’”*

Greater Plantain

Plantago major

This is the most common type of plantain within the British Isles. Wherever humans go the greater plantain tends to follow and this includes America. The native Americans came to give it the name 'English-Mans Foot' because wherever the settlers went the plant seemed to spring up in their footsteps. The plant's leaves are extraordinarily resilient with an elastic quality. Thus they could be trampled with little or no damage. When the 'Doctrine of signatures' was applied this led to the plant being considered ideal for bruises or wounds caused by crushing. The entire leaf could be applied to a wound or abrasion but equally the juice or pulp of the leaf could be used. The sap is very astringent and so is very effective at staunching a bleed. In the event of a haemorrhage the entire plant would be boiled up. In Inverness the leaves were used to treat bleeding 'gatherings' (piles).

Scotland alone seems to have used the plantain for eye conditions as well as tonsillitis (the leaves were applied externally to the throat.)

'Today groundsel is popular as a bird food'

Groundsel

Senecio vulgaris

The common name comes from the Anglo-Saxon *grundswelge* meaning 'ground glutton' as the speed with which this weed grows can give the appearance of rapidly swallowing up land. The Latin *Senecio* derives from *Senex* = old man. This refers to the surface of the plant to which the seeds are attached. Pull the white seed heads off and it leaves a surface clearly resembling a bald head. Today groundsel is popular as a bird food. To our ancestors it was an important and useful medicinal plant. The leaves were so revered as a treatment for skin problems that its Gaelic name translates as simply 'the remedy'. A lotion for chapped hands was made by pouring boiling water over the leaves and rubbing the hands in the liquid that was strained off.

Throughout the British Isles groundsel was regarded as the best possible remedy for drawing matter out of boils, blisters, wounds and even thorns. For these the poultice was applied hot. For inflammation, bruises, swellings or hardened nipples the poultice would be applied cold. Children who had trouble teething were given groundsel softened in milk. This eased the red and sore gums.



Hazel

Corylus avellana

Although hazel is a small tree most people consider it to be a shrub. It was one of the first trees to re-colonise Britain after the last ice age. Hazel is most often to be found where the soil is rich and not too acid in fairly open ground. It is almost always to be found growing close to an oak. Another close friend is the honeysuckle; it is frequently found climbing on hazel. In the wild hazel can be found as a single stemmed small tree. However Hazel has a tendency to self-coppice, i.e. branches drop off or may be broken off by animals or weather; in each case the plant will always respond by sending up straight new shoots from the base. Coppiced hazel has recently been undergoing something of a revival. In parts of Britain wattle fences have been erected alongside motorways to limit noise pollution. Wattle fences or hurdles have been made in Britain since Neolithic times. Then the wattle hurdles were made to enclose a garden (vegetables) and for protecting livestock and their young.

In Scotland the shinty players of Iona used to cut hazel stems on the neighbouring island of Mull and make their sticks from it. Thatched or turfed roofs were supported by hazel stems and they were also made into baskets and creels. The plant was favoured for the making of shepherd's crooks and walking sticks. This probably stems from its ancient use as the staff of divination of the Druids. Today hazel is still the best and most sought after material for dowsing. Here the

Hazel con't

'Hazel was one of the first trees to recolonise Britain after the last ice age'

author can confirm that having been taught dowsing as a horticultural student, without a shadow of a doubt, it works. It is quite a strange feeling when the sticks move of their own accord and each time they moved from pointing straight ahead to pointing straight down, the lecturer confirmed that the author was standing directly over a water pipe. The nuts themselves were just as important a crop as the wood. They were a staple part of the diet for prehistoric peoples, particularly the Celts. Celtic legend has hazel nuts as an emblem for concentrated wisdom. Over the years the hazel nut has acquired many names, Richard Mabey gives a concise explanation:

“Tudor farmers and fruit-growers favoured a variety called the white filbert, very similar to the wild filbert, *Corylus maxima*, of Asia minor. ('Filbert' is named from St Philibert's Day, 20th August, when the nuts are recorded as being ripe.) The name 'cobnut' was not applied to cultivated hazels until later. It derived from a game called 'cob-nut' - 'cob' meant to throw gently - which involved pitching a large nut at a pile of smaller ones. Those knocked off the pile became the property of the thrower.”

The leaves of the hazel contain chemicals which support collagen in the body's connective tissues and can be useful in treating varicose veins and bruising. Recent research has shown that hazel leaves contain taxol, a compound used in treating specific types of cancer.

Herb Robert

Geranium robertianum

This plant tends to flower throughout the year and is easily recognised because of the unpleasant smell of mice that the leaves give off. In conjunction with roses it was used as an infusion in the treatment of erysipelas, a condition which used to be known as the 'rose'. In the Highlands Herb Robert was used to staunch bleeding. In Ireland the plant was known to every farmer of livestock as the plant was the standard treatment for red-water fever, a disease of livestock that used to be particularly common in Ireland.



Herb Robert



Knotgrass

Polygonum aviculare

The specific name, *aviculare*, is from the Latin *aviculus*, a diminutive of *avis* (a bird); this is because small birds feed on the seeds.

The plant has astringent and styptic (stops bleeding) properties, rendering it useful in the treatment of diarrhoea, bleeding piles and all haemorrhages. It also has diuretic properties, for which it is used in strangury (slow & painful discharge of urine) and as an expellant of (kidney) stones. A decoction was also administered to kill worms.

The fresh juice was used to stop nose bleeds. Made into an ointment, squirted up the nose or applied to the temples, it proved a useful remedy for sores. The fruit is emetic and purgative.

'The leaves and flowers of Lesser burdock are edible'

Lesser Burdock


Arctium minus

This plant's name tells you all about it. The leaves resemble those of the dock and the spiky fruits are burrs with hooks on the ends so as to attach themselves to any animal passing by. The Gaelic name *Leadan Liosda* is thought to mean 'stiff locks' (of hair).

The leaves and flowers of the burdock are edible and can be steamed as vegetables or served as a salad with oil and vinegar. In some parts of Europe the tender pith of the young stems was once made into a popular confection. The stems are prepared by peeling away the tough, bitter-tasting outer rind. In Britain burdock has really had only one major medicinal use. It purifies the blood and cleans the system. In so doing it eliminates boils and other skin complaints. Research on burdock shows that it can kill cultures of fungus and bacteria as well as demonstrate anti-tumour activity.

In 1948 Swiss engineer George De Mestral took his dog for a walk in the woods. On returning home both man and dog were covered in burrs. As he was pulling them out of the dog's fur he wondered about the mechanism that enabled them to attach themselves so tenaciously. So he looked at the burrs under a microscope and found that each spur had a hooked end.

Lesser Burdock con't



The numerous hooks grabbed onto anything that had a loop - cloth, animal fur, or human hair. George De Mestral had the vision to see the potential of such a structure and he developed Velcro®. Today in many parts of the British Isles it is known as the Velcro plant - a great example of how common names can appear.

A bizarre tradition centred on burrs is conducted each year in Edinburgh. “The Burry Man parade is held each summer in Queensferry”. No one knows how old the ceremony is, but since 1687 it has been associated with the annual Ferry Fair, now held on the second Friday in August. On that day a man dressed from head to ankle in burrs perambulates about the town, visiting houses and receiving gifts and greetings” (Mabey 1996).



Lesser Burdock

'The name 'filix-mas' or 'male fern' came about because the ancient Greeks and Romans knew little about the reproductive processes in plants'

Male Fern

Dryopteris filix-mas

This plant has been known since classical times as a powerful vermifuge (killer of parasitic worms) particularly for tapeworm. It was the rhizome that was collected, dried and powdered. Even though the ancient Greeks recommended its use in expelling worms, they knew about the poisonous nature of ferns. A liquid extract called 'oleoresin of male fern' used to be made, but was very dangerous. It was generally believed that 'seed' (ferns do not produce seed because they do not produce flowers, instead they produce dust-like spores from which new ferns can develop) from the tallest and thickest ferns had the power to render someone or something invisible. If you carried the seeds or they touched you, you became invisible. An animal upon whom 'seed' would fall was also rendered invisible.

The name 'filix-mas' or 'male fern' came about because the ancient Greeks and Romans knew little about the reproductive processes in plants. When faced with two plants that looked very similar they would declare that the larger, coarser or more vigorous one was a male whilst the smaller, more delicate one was a female. So when they encountered three ferns looking very alike they declared one the male fern, another the female (the Victorians later changed this to 'Lady') fern and the third became the 'brake' or bracken. Today we know that bracken particularly but other ferns as well have carcinogenic (can cause cancer) properties and consequently should never be used internally without first consulting a doctor.

'Meadow buttercup was considered useful for toothache and headaches'

Meadow Buttercup

Ranunculus acris

The meadow buttercup is the commonest species of buttercup found within Scotland. As with many of its relatives grazing animals avoid eating it as it tastes extremely acrid (hence its species name) and is very poisonous. This enables the plant to flourish in heavily grazed pastures at the expense of other plant species. Crushed leaves were tied in rags and applied to boils and infected skin to raise a blister and draw out the pus. In the Highlands and Islands it was popular as a counter irritant against all rheumatic conditions. It was also considered useful for toothache and headaches.



Meadow Buttercup



Mugwort

Artemisia vulgaris

At the end of the last ice age one of the first tundra plants to cover the British Isles was *Artemisia vulgaris*. It has remained a part of the natural vegetation in most other parts of northern Europe. However, in Britain and Ireland today mugwort is confined entirely to man-made habitats. It is especially fond of areas with a high nitrogen content. Like a number of other weeds, where you find human beings you will find mugwort. This appears to have been the case since Mesolithic times. Indeed, throughout Eurasia legends, myths and oral histories concerning this plant are so similar within different regions that it seems possible that mugwort may be one of the oldest herbs known to man.

To the gods of thunder mugwort was sacred and never more so than at Midsummer. A time of plenty, of fertility. This probably accounts for why mugwort has always been associated with women. It was taken to regulate their periods, ease delivery and cleanse the womb. Sons may not have been told why, but they were told never to pull up the mugwort. The plant was named after the Greek goddess Artemis, the goddess of maternity and childbirth. In the classical world this was the female plant above all others.

Mugwort con't

'It was a countrywide belief that travellers who carried mugwort with them, particularly in their shoes, would never get tired'

The common name 'mugwort' means midge-herb, but it has never been considered of any use in keeping insects at bay.

It was a countrywide belief that travellers who carried mugwort with them, particularly in their shoes, would never get tired. Dried mugwort was 'smoked' by generations of young boys, sometimes in a 'pipe' made from an acorn cup with a straw inserted in the side.

Mugwort was also considered a useful treatment for bad coughs, colds and TB.



Ox-eye daisy



Ox-eye Daisy

Leucanthemum vulgare

This plant, which occurs all over Britain, is one of the first to colonise grassland not sprayed with herbicides. As a result it is becoming increasingly more common on waysides land set-aside and it is even turning up in people's lawns. Asthma sufferers were given a tea made from the ox-eye daisy. Mixed with honey the juice was used as a cough treatment and also applied to wounds.

Procumbent Pearlwort

Sagina procumbens

This is a small, common and inconspicuous plant. However, a surprisingly large number of superstitions are attached to it. It is said to be the first plant Jesus Christ stepped on after the resurrection which imbued it with extraordinary magical powers. If placed under the right knee of a woman giving birth it would soothe her and protect mother and child from the fairies - providing she removed all her rings beforehand to stop them from interfering with the action of the plant.

Equally if some of the plant was placed inside the front hooves of a bull just prior to mating it would protect the mother and the just conceived calf as well as the milk. Also a bag of pearlwort placed under the milk churn with some iron nails protected it from bad spirits. In the Shetland Isles the plant was ground into a flour.

Raspberry

Rubus idaeus

The raspberry is one of the soft fruits that seems to prefer the cooler more northerly climate. It does particularly well in Scotland and it is here that cultivation and hybridisation are most successful. Medicinally it has been used for centuries to treat 'women's problems'. It was given as an infusion of the leaves to ease labour pain. It was also used to ease menstrual pain and morning sickness during pregnancy. Raspberry leaf tea is still recommended today to bring on labour.

In the Highlands the pain in the side experienced after contracting jaundice was treated with a mixture of boiled wild raspberry, wild mint and bogbean.



Raspberry

'For it is the four-leaved clover or shamrock that confers protection on anyone that finds it'

Red Clover

Trifolium pratense

This plant has had magical associations for as long as anyone can remember. For it is the four-leaved clover or shamrock that confers protection on anyone that finds it. BUT it only works if found accidentally. The red clover flower is popular when added to salad as it is full of nectar and therefore very sweet.

Red clover, a wild plant used as grazing food for cattle and other livestock, has also been used medicinally to treat a number of conditions. It is a source of many valuable nutrients including calcium, chromium, magnesium, niacin, phosphorus, potassium, thiamine, and vitamin C and is also considered to be one of the richest sources of isoflavones (water-soluble chemicals that act like estrogens (hormones) and are found in many plants). Recently these isoflavones have been tested for their effectiveness in treating a variety of conditions. They have shown promise in the treatment of a number of conditions associated with menopause, such as hot flashes, cardiovascular health, and the bone loss associated with osteoporosis.

Red clover has been used in the treatment of cancer, mastitis (inflammation of the breast), joint disorders, jaundice, bronchitis, spasmodic coughing, asthma, and skin inflammations, such as psoriasis and eczema. It is thought to "purify" the blood by promoting urine and mucous production, improving circulation, and stimulating the secretion of bile.

'In Scotland a popular game was played with the flowers of the plant'

Ribwort Plantain


Plantago lanceolata

Plantains have been used the world over to stem bleeding from external wounds. Usually a crushed single leaf was sufficient. But if the wound or haemorrhage was quite severe then the entire plant might have to be boiled and the liquid used.

Other uses for the ribwort plantain were on rashes and soreness due to rubbing or chafing; piles, burns, varicose veins and drawing pus out of an infected wound or swelling. The plant sap is also said to prevent festering.

In Scotland a popular game was played with the flowers of the plant. It was an alternative to conkers and known as 'Carl doddies'. Carl and Doddie were taken from Charles and George i.e. Bonnie Prince Charlie and King George III. The game is played with the flowering stems of the plant and the idea is they both try to knock each other's heads off. Each person pulled a stem with a strong 'head', held it out and recited:

Ma faither and your faither
Were sitting supping brose.
Ma faither said to your faither
Ah'll hit off your nose



then one struck a sharp blow on the rival's plantain head hoping to knock it off and so be the winner. As in conkers, some plantains were much stronger than others and could go on to knock off many heads and so become a 'champion soldier'.



Rosebay Willowherb

Epilobium angustifolium

It is generally considered a native, but the rosebay willow herb only really arrived in Britain at the end of the last ice age. However, from that time to the present century it was considered a rarity. Today if it appears in our well kept borders it is immediately ripped out as an unwanted weed. It was perceived very differently in the seventeenth century when the famous herbalist Gerard was writing about plants. Its scarcity then meant it was much more appreciated. Gerard describes it as “A goodly and stately plant, . . . garnished with brave flowers of great beautie”.

During the Second World War, the Singer sewing machine factory in Clydebank was bombed and the site colonised by rosebay willowherb. For this reason, in the Clydebank area, the plant has been known as Singerweed. This species is thought to have exploded from its former woodland habitat since The War, with the opportunities presented to it by such bombsites.

On British and indeed, on many European bombsites the circumstances provided ideal conditions for the germination of newly formed seed as well as seed that had lain dormant in the ground for many years. In the square mile of the City of London few areas of ground had seen the light of day for hundreds of years. Indeed many sites have been built upon since Roman times. Only the Great Fire of London provided a brief possibility for plant invasion. The Botanical Society of London recorded that in 1944 the

'During the Second World War, the Singer sewing machine factory in Clydebank was bombed and the site was colonised by rosebay willowherb'

most abundant plant in London and the first to invade blitzed sites was *Epilobium angustifolium*. They also recorded that it was frequently seen atop police boxes, home guard blockhouses, anywhere, in fact, where a little sand or soil had collected.

The transport systems of the world carry more than just people. The open grassland of railway banks creates a perfect environment for many native plants as well as exotic escapees. The advent of the car enabled many city dwellers to take up the popular hobby of picnicking and camping (and with it, fire lighting) in the countryside. Coupled with the fact that another increasingly popular habit was cigarette smoking this led to a large increase in heath fires. Furthermore, during and after the Second World War there was extensive felling of woodland, again creating ideal conditions for the willow herb which grows naturally in open, moist woodland. In burned areas and felled woodlands there is often a temporary increase of nitrates which stimulates willow herb growth.

So, while other plants have become threatened in the late twentieth century, the willow herbs have found life in a human dominated environment coupled with a degree of adaptability, to be very much in their favour. Of course the plant has natural advantages as well. Each specimen can produce up to 80,000 seeds.

Rosebay Willowherb con't

Each seed has attached to it a parachute of many silken hairs which spread out when the air is dry and thus widespread dispersal is ensured in the right conditions. As a further precaution a young established seedling will send out underground runners which can extend as far as 3 ft in a single season and produce new plants.

The rosebay willowherb has a long history of use as both a food and a medicinal. Historically, medicinal use includes oral use of the plant extracts, often in the form of an infusion or tea, as a treatment for prostate and urinary problems including benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH) or enlarged prostate; and for various gastrointestinal disorders such as dysentery or diarrhoea. Topically the plant has been used traditionally as a soothing, cleansing and healing agent to treat minor burns, skin rashes, ulcers, and numerous other skin irritations and afflictions. Willowherb extracts possess antimicrobial effects against a number of bacteria.



Rosebay Willowherb

'The rowan was always a symbol of death or the after-life'

Rowan, Mountain Ash

Sorbus aucuparia

*"Pluck the fruit of the Rowan
and put witches to flight"*

The rowan was a very important tree to the Celts. It was associated with the Celtic paradise and 'Avalach', the in-between world separating earth and paradise. Avalach ('Avalon' in the Celtic south-west of England) has the same linguistic root as apple. When souls reached the further shore of the river of death they were greeted by either an apple tree (in the south-west of England) in full leaf, flower and fruit; or (in the Scottish Highlands) a rowan.

There is probably more superstition and folklore associated with the rowan than any other native Scottish tree. Many of the origins of it are now lost in the mists of time. The rowan was always a symbol of death or the after-life. The tree was said to be inhabited by the spirits of the dead which rendered it immune to the spells of bad witches. At Beltane (the eve of the 1st of May) witches were thought to be especially active in byres, stealing the cow's milk, turning it sour and doing all kinds of mischief. So branches of rowan were placed across the cowshed door. Also crosses of rowan wood were tied to the tails of cows preventing them from being bewitched. Even in modern times rowans have been planted next to new houses - just in case!

Rowan, Mountain Ash con't



'The rowan grows at a higher altitude than almost any other native tree'


A tale from Kintyre tells of a fox being chased by the hunt. Eventually it came to a cliff and by dropping from rowan to rowan it lowered itself to safety. This enforces the view that the rowan is a protector.

Another commonly used name for the tree is 'Mountain Ash'. This is because the leaves are very similar in appearance to those of the ash. In fact the two trees are not related at all.

The rowan grows at a higher altitude than almost any other native tree, up to 2,000 feet. This probably added to the awe with which the tree was viewed as it would be much closer to the kingdom of the gods than any other tree.

The rowan has been here for over 10,000 years and it doesn't just survive, it thrives. It grows in the most inhospitable places throughout Scotland but particularly within the Highlands. It is perfectly adapted to this life. The tree can also provide food and accommodation for local wildlife. Birds like the Scottish crossbill and the capercaillie like to feed on the young buds and fruit. Other birds come for the flies and other insects that are attracted by the flowers and fruit. Deer will feed on the young buds.

There were very strong taboos about collecting parts of the tree. Fruits and flowers were all right but taking twigs or branches or even



the timber - unless on specific ritual days - could bring down unspeakable bad luck on those concerned. Consequently, there are surprisingly few uses for the tree. Rowan berries in the past were used to make black and orange dyes.

Medicinally, the bark was used to make a poultice in the case of adder bites and as a purgative in Moray. In isolated areas the berries were used as a treatment for scurvy. A gargle was produced by boiling the fruits. A decoction of the fruits added to apples and sugar was a treatment for whooping cough.



Self-heal

Prunella vulgaris

This was a very important medicinal plant in Scotland. Septic wounds had an ointment applied to them consisting of self-heal, golden rod and fresh butter. It is astringent and so staunches bleeding; it eased respiratory problems and was a treatment for heart disease.

In 1547 and 1566 self-heal came into its own when military physicians used it to treat a contagious fever within the imperial armies of Germany. It became known as "the browns" as it was characterised by a sore throat and a brown-coated tongue. Its Latin name *Prunella* came from Brunella, from the German bruen meaning quinsy or trench mouth. *Vulgaris* comes from vulgus, of the common people. Both refer to the ancient belief in the healing powers of this plant.

'This very common weed has been valued through the ages'

Shepherd's Purse

Capsella bursa-pastoris

This plant acquired its common name through the similarity of its heart-shaped seed cases to the purses or pouches worn hung by draw-strings from the belt by medieval peasants. When totally ripe they will split into two and copper-coloured seeds (like money) pour forth.

This very common weed has been valued through the ages for its astringent properties which stop bleeding from wounds as well as severe menstrual bleeding. It has also been used in the treatment of piles, bruises, strains, diarrhoea, jaundice, rheumatism, bladder infections, dropsy and scurvy.



Shepherd's Purse


'In the Highlands birch sap has long been made into a tonic wine'

Silver Birch

Betula pendula

One of the smallest, most graceful and shortest-lived of British trees, the birch is also one of the toughest. After the glaciers retreated at the end of the last ice age the birch was one of the first trees to re-colonise Britain. It produces seed in vast quantities and these are blown everywhere. Its elegant appearance belies the fact that birch will grow where few other trees can. It tolerates high moors of acid soil as well as low badly-drained bogs. They can be found clinging to rock faces at 2000 ft with only the tiniest amount of debris to live on. Yet birches are equally at home in rich, deep soils or in lime, clay or sand. This ability to thrive almost anywhere does not actually make it popular with foresters. As a pioneer species birches will invade young plantations of other species. Before the intervention of people birch helped to create a habitat for oak or for pine. This tree also acts as a magnet for numerous other forms of wildlife e.g. birds, badgers, stoats, wood-mice, lichens, mosses, ferns, bracket fungus, boleta mushrooms and it is the favourite host for fly agaric mushrooms.

As birch wood tends to rot quite readily it was rarely used for outdoor purposes. So it was used for furniture, bowls, bobbins and was the traditional wood for making infants' cradles. Today much chipboard is made from birch wood. The besom broom traditionally used in the garden (but always associated with witches as their favourite mode of transport) is always made of birch.



In the Highlands birch sap has long been made into a tonic wine, highly rated as a treatment for rheumatism.

A tea made from birch leaves is diuretic and anti-inflammatory and has been considered beneficial for treating gout, arthritis and other joint diseases. The leaves contain potassium and so do not cause the potassium-depleting problem associated with conventional diuretic drugs. Birch leaf tea, when suffering from gout is especially helpful as it helps to lower levels of uric acid in the body, which is a major cause of this condition.



Silverweed

Potentilla anserina

The Gaelic name for this plant 'brisgean' means 'brittle one'. It is thought this refers to the root which was an important food in the Highlands and Islands before potatoes became a popular vegetable in the 18th century. The roots could be eaten boiled, baked or roasted when they tasted similar to a parsnip, or raw when they were crunchy. They were also later dried and ground up to make bread or a type of porridge. However, it was really a famine food.

The soft downy leaves were sometimes stuffed into the shoes of carriers and other travellers to give some relief from chafing or sweating. This led to another of its names, more often used in England - 'Traveller's Ease'.

Medicinally the plant has astringent qualities. It was used as a mouthwash for sore throats, mouth ulcers and gum infections. It was also used to treat piles, indigestion and stomach ache.

'Today St John's wort is well known as a herbal remedy for depression'

St John's Wort

Hypericum perforatum


In ancient Greece St. John's wort was called *hyperikon*. The derivation of the name is unknown but it was believed that the herb was so repellant to evil spirits that a whiff of it would cause them to fly.

St. John's wort was so closely linked to Midsummer that it was renamed when the date became a Christian holiday. It was one of the key plants burned in the Midsummer Day fires, a tradition throughout Europe right up to the end of the 19th century. The fires were symbolically intended to purify the local communities and crops. . . . "the fires were prehistoric in origin, probably based on sympathetic magic, and were intended both to mimic (and thus strengthen) the power of the sun, and, by allowing the smoke of the burning herbs to waft over the fields, to protect crops and cattle from other, more malevolent summer 'heats': lightning, drought, field-fires"

St John's wort was also placed over doors along with fennel to prevent witchcraft and other evil influences from entering.

If a leaf of the plant is held up to the light small holes or perforations are visible around its edge. They are, in fact, glands containing resin and it is these that give the plant its rather unpleasant smell.

St John's Wort con't



They were also responsible for advocates of the Doctrine of Signatures determining the plant as a remedy for burns and minor abrasions.

Today St John's wort is well known as a herbal remedy for depression. It is interesting to note that historical literature and oral histories give only two places in the entire British Isles using the plant for that purpose: the Isle of Man and the Scottish Highlands. Legend has it that St Columba saved a young shepherd from going mad through long, lonely hours on the hillsides. He applied a wad of St John's wort under the armpits. This (and the groin) is an area of the body where blood vessels run extremely close to the surface of the skin and the pores are very open to allow sweating so it is the best place for absorption. Subsequently the plant became known in that region as 'St Columba's oxtetful' (Mabey 1996). Time has not left the plant behind for today the chemical make-up of the plant is being investigated as a possible treatment for AIDS.

'The plant would be wiped over a joint of meat to keep away blow flies'

Tansy

Tanacetum vulgare

This is a very strong plant, its leaves are bitter to the taste with a pungent odour. The leaves used to be incorporated into a mixture of eggs, milk and flour. This became known as a tansye.

The Gaelic name for the plant *lus na Frainge* which was recorded as long ago as 1698 from Skye meant 'French herb'. At that time it was used most commonly to repel animal pests. It was drunk as a tea to dispel intestinal worms; it was strewn in side dwellings to deter insects and mice. The plant would even be wiped over a joint of meat to keep away blow flies.

In the 17th and 18th centuries when people believed that plague was caused by bad odours some native Orkadians developed the habit of keeping a piece of tansy between their upper lip and nose. In Scotland it was regarded as a most effective treatment for gout when drunk as a tea. It was also used by women to ease period pains.



Tansy

'By the sixteenth century the thistle had become the national emblem of Scotland'

Thistle


Cirsium vulgare

The symbol of Scotland recognised immediately by visitors and natives alike is the thistle. It was the Stewart Kings who were the first in Scotland to take the thistle as their family emblem. At that time it was pronounced 'thrissle'. It first appears in 1470 on a silver groat of James III. It would seem that he borrowed it from his 'Auld Alliance' colleagues the French who, in 1370, founded the Order of the Thistle which was then incorporated into tapestries.

By the sixteenth century the thistle had become the national emblem of Scotland. It was on the coinage and Mary Queen of Scots had it incorporated onto the Great Seal of Scotland. However, it was only in 1687, after the union of the Scottish and English crowns, that James VII (James II of England) initiated the Order of the Thistle within Scotland.

All Scots know the story of the Viking who trod on a thistle, cried out in pain, thereby alerting the Scots and preventing a massacre (of the wrong side, that is). This indicates a low growing, small thistle which could only be the dwarf thistle. This, however, does not grow in Scotland. Also there is no record of this story before 1829 so it would appear to be a simple piece of romanticism, an explanation for the choice of the thistle as Scotland's emblem.

It's a good question, why the thistle? Why not that other well-known plant of Scotland - heather? Doubtless the Stewarts saw the




characteristics of the thistle as mirroring their own - durability, toughness, fearlessness, proud, impregnable. “Possibly the thistle also emblemised the Scots' chosen arm of defence - a prickly fence of massed spears, the *schiltrom*.” (Mabey, 1996).

There has been confusion for centuries over which thistle is THE Scottish thistle. The closest plant to that used on some coins but most especially the heraldry is *Onopordum acanthium* - the cotton thistle. “Heraldic art sacrificed scientific accuracy for effectiveness of design”. Coincidentally the heads of the cotton thistle just happen to match the symbolically perfect idea of a thistle. These are also the thistles planted each year in the garden of Holyrood House prior to the Queen's arrival. Sir Walter Scott chose the *Onopordum acanthium* to be carried in procession through Edinburgh in 1822 during the visit of King George IV. Little attention seems to have been given to the fact that the cotton thistle *Onopordum acanthium* is rarely seen growing wild in Scotland.

It seems much more likely that the Stewarts would have chosen a plant they were very familiar with. The spear thistle, *Cirsium vulgare*, grows wild all over Scotland. Robert Burns knew it as the 'Burr Thistle'. In Northern Ireland the plant long known as the traditional 'Scotch Thistle' is *Cirsium vulgare*.

Thistle con't



There is a white form of *Cirsium vulgare* and on the Brough of Birsay in Orkney it is the only form to grow there. This and the more traditional pink/purple form are still used in traditional ceremonies in Dumfries and Galloway. It is always carried at the “Riding the Marches” ceremony in Langholm each July. Here the thistle is said to represent a warning from the people to the lairds not to meddle with their privileges. Pick the spear thistle just before the flowers open and the tips added to indigo will produce an emerald green dye. Thistle tea was used as a remedy for depression.

'The deliciously sweet little fruits were very popular at the court of James IV'

Wild Strawberry

Fragaria vesca

There is nothing to compare to the flavour of a ripe wild strawberry. They are actually quite common throughout the British Isles but because of their tiny size they are so often overlooked. Contrary to popular opinion it is not the direct ancestor of today's modern commercial varieties.

In the past the roots, leaves and runners were all boiled up together in a fairly strong beer and drunk night and morning as a treatment for jaundice. Also the astringent leaves and roots were made into a tea to be drunk after diarrhoea or dysentery. The deliciously sweet little fruits were very popular at the court of James IV and were used for rheumatic gout and sunburn as well as a cosmetic substitute for rouge.



Wild Strawberry

'The wych elm is sometimes called the Scotch elm in Scotland'


Wych Elm

Ulmus glabra

The elm has always had a melancholy feel to it. Many other leafless trees in winter are still handsome but the semi-weeping habit that many elms have can make it look stark and even sad. Added to this is the fact that for well over a quarter of a century, since the late 1960s in fact, British elms slowly but inexorably died. Dutch Elm Disease swept across the British Isles destroying virtually all elms in its wake. Dutch Elm Disease is a fungus *Ceratocystis ulmi* which is spread by bark beetles burrowing into the bark and spreading the fungal spores. As a result the British landscape was changed forever.

The wych elm is sometimes called the Scotch elm in Scotland. Although it grows throughout the country it is most common in the border counties. It is undoubtedly native to the Highlands but is very spread out there. The elm is unique in that it does not grow in forests because it requires a lot of space around it and light. Consequently elms only grow singly or in very small groups. This need for high light and space means that elm has never been one of the dominant trees in Britain.

Those native trees that had limited use for people developed little or no folklore around them; this is the case with the Scots pine as well as the wych elm. The wych elm has the densest timber within the native species but it distorts easily and so has to be seasoned very carefully.



It is very pliable and because of this a 12th century writer Giraldus Cambrensis tells us that the Welsh longbow was made of elm unlike the English longbow which was made of Yew.

As well as being pliable the timber is strong and is slow to rot. It behaves extremely well in very wet situations. Many English towns had water main pipes made of elm. Some of these old mains are occasionally dug up today. Wheels were also made of elm as they could withstand strong impacts. Cattle are particularly fond of eating elm leaves.

The slimy, mucilaginous inner bark of the tree was used as a salve in the 18th century. It is of course, related to the 'Slippery Elm' (*Ulmus fulva*) of North America.



Yarrow

Achillea millefolium

Yarrow is one of the most ancient and most respected of medicinal plants. It acquired its generic Latin name as the physician centaur Chiron (in Greek mythology) treated Achilles for burns after his mother had tried to incinerate him as her unlucky seventh child.

In first millennium Britain the Anglo Saxons considered yarrow to be a good luck charm against misfortune and illness. It has been called 'soldier's woundwort' and 'carpenter's grass' for its ancient use in stopping the flow of blood from wounds, cuts and sores. It was also used to stop nosebleeds, uterine haemorrhaging and to lower high blood pressure. Paradoxically it was also used to make the nose bleed. In 1777 John Lightfoot wrote in his *'Flora Scotica'*:

“The highlanders still continue to make an ointment of it to heal and dry up wounds. The common people, in order to cure the headache, do sometimes thrust a leaf of it up their nostrils to make their nose bleed.”

Yarrow was also much used in the treatment of coughs, colds, bronchitis, asthma, fevers and catarrh. It was given as a general pick-me-up and to counter depression. All in all yarrow was one of the main plants in the first aid kits of our ancestors.



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Louise Bustard

Disclaimer

No medical treatments mentioned in this booklet should be attempted without first consulting a qualified doctor or herbalist.



*“Anything green that grew out of the mould,
was an excellent herb to our fathers of old”*

Rudyard Kipling



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