



The glorious world of wild flowers

Getting to know the folk names of our wild flowers is a wonderful way of deepening our connection with the Nature on our own doorsteps, says Stephanie Boxall

As a child, I loved Cicely Mary Barker's *Flower Fairies* books. I was enchanted by the beautiful illustrations and the colourful names, which captured my imagination. Old man's beard was one that really stuck in my mind – I didn't know the Latin name of the plant, but I knew what it looked like, and even now, every time I go for a walk, I recognise it when I see it.

Since the publication of the first book in 1923, there has been a steady decline in biodiversity in this country. According to the charity Plantlife, 97% of UK wildflower meadows have been lost since the 1930s. "A lot of that would have happened during and after the war," says Plantlife botanist Sarah Shuttleworth. "The country had to direct its energy towards food production, so land that might previously have been left would have been given over to intensive farming, and many of our meadows would have suffered. Wild flowers are the food plants for so many invertebrates, and they in turn provide food for birds and mammals. So, without plants, biodiversity is going to suffer."

The Convention on Biological Diversity's Global Strategy for Plant Conservation goes even further: "Without plants, there is no life. The functioning of the planet, and our survival, depends on plants."

Now more than ever, as we grapple with the growing environmental crisis, we need to foster a closer relationship with Nature, but we don't have to be part of an organisation to make a difference. We can all make a connection with our own patch of green – even if it's just in a pot on the windowsill – and one way to do that is to reclaim some of the ancient knowledge of people who lived on and by the land, the sort of people who gave our native wild flowers those evocative names.

Looking deeper into the subject for this piece, I realised I was in danger of biting off more than I could chew: the Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland lists 3,495 native and non-native plant species in its plant distribution atlas, and, depending on where in the country you live, almost every wild flower seems to have several folk names. In his book *The Unofficial Countryside*, Nature writer Richard Mabey offers this: "Lady's slipper – birdsfoot trefoil in the books – has over seventy different local names, including boxing gloves, butter-and-eggs, cuckoo's stockings, Devils' claws, fell bloom, grandmother's toenails, ground honeysuckle, kitty-two-shoes, milk maidens, pattens-and-clogs, rosy morn, Tom Thumb." I could see I had my work cut out.

The plant that sparked my interest was rosebay willowherb (*Chamaenerion angustifolium*). Known as fireweed in the US because of its habit of flourishing in the wake of forest fires, it earned the nickname 'bombweed' over here when it sprang up on bomb sites across London during and after the second world war. But, again according to Mabey, tolerance to heat might not have been the only reason for its abundance: "Suddenly there was a vast wilderness of scorched, devastated earth, laid open to the light for perhaps the first time in centuries... By the end of the war, there was scarcely a single piece of waste ground in the City that was not ablaze with their purple flowers."

We can learn a lot from the folk names of wild flowers. Scarlet pimpernel (*Anagallis arvensis*) is sometimes known as shepherd's weatherglass because the flower heads close at the approach of bad weather, goat's beard (*Tragopogon pratensis*) is sometimes called Jack-go-to-bed-at-noon, because the petals open at dawn and close at midday, and the cuckoo flower (*Cardamine pratensis*), which traditionally appears when the cuckoo's call signals the arrival of spring, is also known as lady's smock, suggested, some say, by the shape of its delicate lilac flowers. Old man's beard is another folk name that reflects the plant's appearance. Commonly called traveller's joy (*Clematis vitalba*), it comes into its own in the winter when its white, wispy seed-heads cover the hedgerows. And a host of wild flowers have common names that borrow from those of animals: dovesfoot cranesbill, dog rose, mouse-ear hawkweed and the irresistible viper's bugloss, known in some parts of the country as snake flower.

Another area where appearance is significant is the doctrine of signatures. Traditionally, many herbalists believed that a plant resembling a part of the body could be used as a cure for a related ailment. For example, eyebright (*Euphrasia spp.*) would have been used to treat eye disorders, field scabious (*Knautia arvensis*), whose rough stem recalled scabby skin, was the go-to plant to alleviate scabies, and tree lungwort (*Lobaria pulmonaria*), a rare lichen whose appearance could be said to resemble a human lung, would have been sought out to cure pulmonary problems. And I can't leave the subject of folk names without mentioning lords and ladies (*Arum maculatum*), which surely takes the prize for the longest of all: Kitty-come-down-the-lane-jump-up-and-kiss-me.

These are just a few of the hundreds of species of wild plant that still flourish in the British Isles and only a handful of the names they have been given by people who have noticed and thought about them. As a place to start, looking seems as good as any. "Recent research suggests that people aren't noticing flowers any more," says Shuttleworth, "and that's something we've got to tackle: to get people to stop and notice them."

One way Plantlife is getting to grips with this, in add-ition to its work creating Nature reserves and restoring species-rich grasslands, is through its flagship campaign No Mow May, which encourages people to let their gardens grow wild during the month of May. "It inspires people to look at their own spaces and see what's happening where they live, and that increases their interest," says Shuttleworth. "As soon as you start looking, your interest grows."

As well as looking more closely at our own spaces, looking back to the past and learning from our ancestors can sometimes be a way of helping us navigate the future, and it's important to keep this knowledge alive so that we can pass it on. Whatever names we know them by – and, depending on where we live, those names will probably be different – encouraging wild flowers to grow on our own patches of green, however small, is a wonderful way of keeping in touch with the wild on our own doorsteps. And, in helping to restore some of the biodiversity we have lost, we are helping to create a better world for ourselves and our children – a world where we can all live in harmony with Nature, not in competition with it.

Plants in decline

The Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland has just published the devastating results of a 20-year research project that reveals the shocking extent of the loss of British and Irish wild plants.

Described as the single most powerful statement ever produced on the state of our wild and naturalised plants, it shows

- 53% of native plants in decline in Britain
- non-native plants now outnumbering native plants in the wild
- montane (inhabiting mountainous regions) plants declining due to climate change

To read the full results of this research visit www.bsbi.org

For more on wild flowers and No Mow May visit www.plantlife.org.uk

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Call of the Wild

Wisdom and Wellbeing

The glorious world of wild flowers
by *Stephanie Boxall*



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