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: “lady’s slipper” — bindweed tinfoil in the books — has over seventy different local names, including bowing glasses, butter-and-eggs, cuckoo’s stockings, devil’s claw, fall bloom, grandmother’s toenails, ground honeysuckle, kitty-two-shoes, milk maidens, pattens-and-clogs, slipper – birdsfoot trefoil in the books – has over seventy different local names. These are just a few of the hundreds of species of wild plant that still flourish in the British Isles and it’s wonderful to know the folk names those evocative names.

Looking deeper into the subject for this piece, I realised I was in danger of being bitten off more than I could chew. I consulted the Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland lists, 1,495 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 local names, in his book The English Countryside, Nature writer Richard Mabey offers this: “Lady’s slipper — bindweed tinfoil in the books — has over seventy different local names, including bowing glasses, butter-and-eggs, cuckoo’s stockings, devil’s claw, fall bloom, grandmother’s toenails, ground honeysuckle, kitty-two-shoes, milk maidens, pattens-and-clogs, slipper — birdsfoot trefoil in the books — has over seventy different local names.”

The plant that sparked my interest was rosebay willowherb (Chamerion angustifolium). Known as fireweed in the US because of its habit of flowering in the wake of forest fires, it earned the nickname ‘bonfire herb’ over here when it sprang up on bomb sites London after the end of the 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 rosy morn, Tom Thumb.” I could see I had my work cut out.

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 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 knowledge that would 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 plants anymore,” 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-it-on 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’s inspired people to see their own space as a production line, so land that might previously have been tamed,” 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 bringing back species that we used to see in our own area. 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 used to care pulmonary problems. And I can’t leave the subject of folk names without mentioning lords and ladies (Tragopogon pratensis) 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 used to care pulmonary problems. And I can’t leave the subject of folk names without mentioning lords and ladies (Tragopogon pratensis)

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