Britain's Wild Flowers

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

If you stay close to nature, to its simplicity, to the small things hardly noticeable, those things can unexpectedly become great and immeasurable.

RAINER-MARIA RILKE, *LETTERS TO A YOUNG POET*

'I love all wild flowers (none are weeds with me)' wrote nineteenth-century poet and naturalist John Clare. For many of us, wild flowers link to childhood, to wonder and innocence: a daisy or a dandelion may be among our earliest memories of the natural world. At a very young age, children sense the beauty and mystery of nature: wild flowers imprint on the imagination and are connected with feelings of delight and awe. The memory lingers: traditional flower-rich hay meadows, once an everyday sight and now so rare, express for many of us the soul of the countryside.

Wild flowers and human beings are old acquaintances: they have played a significant part both in our cultural history and in our wider consciousness. On a practical level, meadows have been a feature of the English landscape for centuries: they provided pastureland for livestock, grass and hay for fodder, plant matter for manure, and furze and grasses for bedding. Nectar and pollen from meadowland flowers provided essential food for pollinators of food crops. Wild plants from the fields and woods provided sustenance for the human body, too, and medicine from earliest times. Beyond that, the scope of wild flowers reaches from philosophy and history to the supernatural and trans-human worlds of mythology and magic, alchemy and religion, to the realms of science and art, botany and anthropology through to literature, legend and the fine arts.

Looking at the natural histories of wild flowers, this book explores the web of interrelationships linking us to them. In its origins, the term

'natural history' described a cross-discipline of numerous specialities encompassing scientific analysis and a broad spectrum of the humanities, including theology. A discipline of both natural and cultural components based on accurate observation and validated experience, the study of plants spanned the utilitarian to the philosophical. The plurality of 'natural history' started with Aristotle, built on an enquiry into the underlying concept of the 'Great Chain of Being', which intuited twentieth-century scientific discoveries of the atomic interconnectedness of the physical world, linking to the chain of dependency that constitutes the complex maze of ecology.

WILD FLOWERS AND MEDICINE

Fossil evidence 60,000 years old shows that Paleolithic man used plants as medicine. Sumerian clay tablets from 3000BC mention opium and myrrh as plant remedies. The first written record, from China around 2800BC, lists 366 medicinal plants, and the Ebers papyrus of 1500BC shows an in-depth knowledge of 850 plants, indicating that herbal medicine flourished in ancient Egypt.

In the Galenic and Hippocratic traditions, Nature was depicted as a 'homely woman' who removed illness from the body by affecting the elements that had caused disease, washing them from the body and bringing healthful balance and harmony: a concept of holism where treatment involved the patient not just physically, but mentally and spiritually too. Plants were believed to have powers to protect the soul from harm, and the divine magic of wild flowers required particular rituals to ensure their potency. Country superstitions sprouted, and with them a tradition of folk cures, which also encompassed the placebo effect. In perceiving the relationship between disease, health and cure, the line between the physical and the psychological was blurred – often in a useful way. The prevailing theory of 'humours', personality types based on body fluids, underlined a psychology of illness and health that, combined with everyday plant science, was to rural herb women, and men, a matter of common sense. Thus superstitions about certain plants and the manner of their gathering

were grounded in a particular wisdom. The healing properties of plants even extended to livestock. In 1960 George Ewart Evans wrote in *The Horse and the Furrow* of fevers treated with agrimony, and of coughs and colds cured with feverfew, belladonna, meadow-rue and horehound. For de-worming, the horsemen used celandine, and to encourage appetite they put gentian, elecampane, horehound and felwort into the horses' feed.

Plants are nature's great chemists. Wild flowers were (and are) serious medicine. Over 50 per cent of modern prescription drugs are derived from chemical compounds first identified in plants (70 per cent of all anti-cancer drugs came originally from plant chemicals). Herbal medicines do not differ greatly from synthetic drugs in the way they work. Wild plants have proven medicinal properties: antiseptic, antispasmodic, antibacterial, antiviral, diuretic, anti-flatulent, expectorant, anti-inflammatory, antifungal. Others detoxify, bring down fevers, act as antihistamines or afford pain relief. Traditional country cures have been authenticated by scientific research: digoxin from foxgloves, aspirin from willow, colchicine from autumn crocus, opium from poppies, vincristine from periwinkle, galantamine from snowdrops, paclitaxel from yew. Even the commonest 'weeds' such as nettle, chickweed and dandelion possess compounds which have measurable biochemical effects.

After the founding of the National Health Service in Britain in the 1940s, people became dependent on synthetic drugs for everyday complaints that used to be easily and safely treated with natural remedies. Despite the burgeoning of the pharmaceutical companies that have come to dominate western medicine, this herbal knowledge survives in scattered parts of rural Europe where the production and processing of medicinal plants still flourishes, notably in Italy where ancient herbal traditions are kept alive. There are places where women still make traditional family medicines and where you can buy dried plant remedies. Centres of research in cities and towns such as Florence and San Sepulcro continue to evaluate scientifically the therapeutic value of plants in human health. Although European Union regulations for licensing and selling herbal medicines have restricted their commercial use, there are no laws against making your

own. With knowledge, care and the right guidance, many plants can still be used for non-serious everyday ailments.

WILD PLANTS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Alongside practical uses in food and drink, plant dyes, aromatics and cosmetics, whimsy found its place in rural tradition. Plants were observed to behave in particular ways in certain conditions, and became weather indicators. Others were oracles of love, or omens of disaster, or luck-bringers. The rich tradition of folklore that developed in the countryside, largely an oral one but now generally relegated to dry-as-dust tomes or the memories of grandparents and great-grandparents, is playful, imaginative and entertaining: in the mid-nineteenth century when it was still common currency, John Clare wrote in one of his 'Natural History Letters' that 'Superstition with all her deformity is a very poetical personage with me & I love to dwell on such trifles.'

THE GREAT HERBALISTS

Handing down the wisdom of specific properties of plants, whether practical, medicinal or apotropaic, was a natural part of rural life in days of a then-essential, pre-pharmaceutical knowledge of medicine. The herbals of the so-called 'Dark' Ages and medieval Europe evolved in response to this need: a lasting delight to read, they are a heady mixture of genuine science, wacky superstition and elegant prose, a tribute to the lost wisdom of an era considerably more connected to the natural world than ours. Much of the plant medicine relied on was based on writings from the early centuries of the first millennium and before: Theophrastus (*Enquiry into Plants*), Pliny the Elder (*Natural History*), Dioscorides (*De Materia Medica*), and Galen who among other writings contributed a treatise with the wonderful title *That the Best Physician is also a Philosopher*.

In the early medieval period, when Benedictine monasteries

became the sole repositories of learning, monks studied these works for their centuries-old wisdom, and became default physicians to the people in their communities. They grew the raw materials in their physic gardens, drying and distilling them for myriad cures. To add to this treasure trove of knowledge, the Crusaders of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries brought back from the Middle East sophisticated plant lore from Arab traditions. Through trade routes, the medieval Islamic world had absorbed much knowledge from China, India and Persia, along with that of the Classical writers. They developed the science of pharmacology later inherited by Europe through works of, among others, Avicenna, whose *The Canon of Medicine* of 1025 remained the standard medical text book for centuries, and is one of the most famous books in the history of its subject.

From the manuscripts of the eighth to fourteenth centuries, to the printed herbals of 1470–1670, medieval and Renaissance herbals preserved the science of Islamic, Christian, Ancient Greek and Roman traditions. In the sixteenth century a notorious historical footnote, the Doctrine of Signatures, popped up, maintaining that plants resembling various parts of the body were designed by their Creator to treat ailments of that part: so the lesser celandine with its knotted tubers resembling a cluster of piles was for centuries known as pilewort, and used as a remedy. The Doctrine of Signatures also allied colour to cure: the yellow flower of the dandelion would cure jaundice; the greater celandine inflammation of the bile duct. Many of the herbals incorporate these quirky ideas in parallel with traditional and more authentic medicine. Couched in the literary conventions of their time, many of the herbals are illustrated with woodcuts, drawings, paintings and engravings, which have contributed to the great art of botanical illustration.

WILD FLOWERS IN THE LITERARY AND RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION

Given their potency, natural and supernatural and aesthetic, it's

unsurprising that wild flowers are threaded through the creative and literary imagination, that their wisdom has spawned proverbs, allegories and country dictums, that floral metaphors became woven into philosophy, legend and literature, and that wild flowers with their singular mixture of physical beauty and metaphysical mystery were and are an inspiration to poets and artists. These elements make plants potent symbols: in the Bible the vine, the oak, the bramble, the laurel, the nettle and the poppy are all universal signifiers. Flowers abound in art, architecture, heraldry, rituals and sacred practices, kindling the religious imagination of mankind from the world-soul of neo-Platonism to Blake's 'the holiness of the minute particular' to Darwin's 'endless forms most beautiful' to John Clare, who went 'seeking the religion of the fields... [where] birds bees trees flowers all talked to me incessantly louder than the busy hum of men and who so wise as nature out of doors on the green grass by woods and streams under the beautiful sunny sky––daily communings with God and not a word spoken––', and to Richard Jefferies, he who breathed the wind and the wild flowers into language, who perceived 'something beyond the philosophies in the light, in the grass blades, the leaf, the grasshopper, the sparrow on the wall.'

MEADOWS OF THE MIND

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Inifinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

As William Blake in *Songs of Innocence and Experience* here implies, there is more to a wild flower than just a wild flower. Meadows of the mind is a trope for one of the two worlds we all live in: the material world and the world as we interpret it, the world of the imagination. As Peter Marren pointed out in *British Wildlife* in 1995, a wildflower meadow is:

> *a folk memory, a dreamy place of tall grass and wild flowers, willow pollards and thick hedges, haycocks, sweet scents and happy country folk drinking cider … and preferably other angels to do all the farm work while we laze in the sun, read poetry and listen to the bees and the skylarks.*

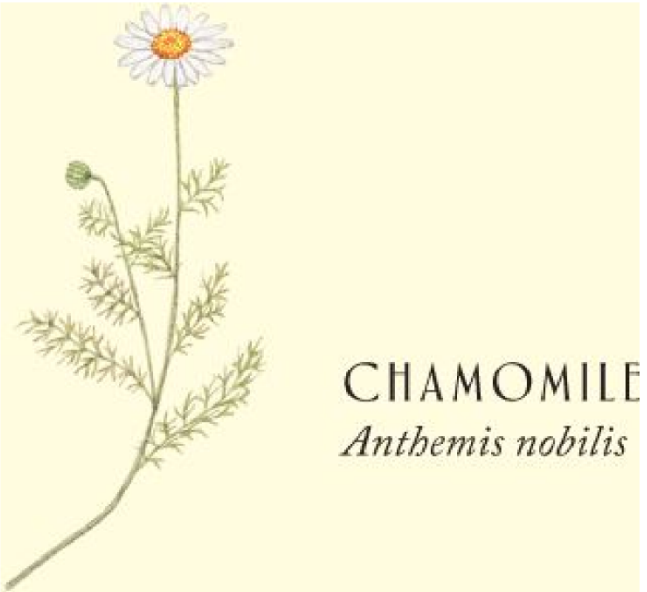
Just the idea of a meadow is a potent force, even to those who have never seen one. The beauty of wild flowers on a grassy bank in spring, or covering herb-rich grassland in summer, whether for real, or in art or film, or just as an idea, may awaken existential longing, stimulating the human impulse to question its own mortality. With their short lives and perennial return wild flowers are symbols of birth, life, death, afterlife and eternity. They remind us of our ephemerality. Through them we connect to the liminal, to the natural mysteries of life and death and transcendence. Wild flowers confront us with the 'how' and 'why' questions of existence, to creation with its unending cycles and innate transience. The *perpetuum mobile* of existence with its unrepeatability, described by Richard Feynman as 'the inconceivable nature of nature', provides a mystery that provokes in us Coleridge's 'shaping power of the imagination'. Wild flowers bridge these physical and metaphysical worlds with what Richard Jefferies called 'the alchemy of nature'. In the tiniest detail of a bird's nest, or the beauty of ivy clambering over a gatepost, he encountered the metaphysics of small things:

> *… the grass of my golden meadow has no design, and no purpose: it is beautiful, and more; it is divine.*

'The world is a mirror of absolute beauty', wrote Thomas Traherne in the seventeenth century. John Clare in the nineteenth discovered what was, for him, the 'divinity of the fields', and Jefferies wrote of 'the soul of the flowers':

> *I want the inner meaning and the understanding of the wild flowers in the meadow … They make no shadow of*

pretence, these beautiful flowers, of being beautiful for my sake ... but the word soul does not in the smallest degree convey the meaning of my wish.



'Meadows matter', cries George Peterken in his definitive *Meadows* of 2013. They are safe places which represent civilisation. 'In their traditional form they are the embodiment of the pastoral ideal, the repository of memories of a pre-industrial countryside'. There is a thirst for these oases of beauty, as evidenced by naming a disproportionate number of housing estates with the tag of 'meadow'. Wild flowers meet a deep human need: as the biographer of Edward Jenner, F. D. Prewitt, wrote, 'Botanists are among these who know that, in spite of the rude shocks of life, it is well to have lived, and to have seen the everlasting beauty of the world.'

WILD FLOWERS AND WELL-BEING

Looking to the health of the natural environment, and connecting it to

the spiritual well-being of the nation, the Coronation Meadows Project of 2013 celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II by identifying one 'crown jewel' meadow in every county in the UK, each destined to become a seed bank for the creation and restoration of other meadows in the same county. From the smallest site to one of 400 acres, these herb-rich pastures of native flowers will provide habitats for pollinators, and places of beauty for people, gentle, quiet places to counterbalance the noisy consumerism of the commercial world.

'To a man of dissernment [*sic*] there is happiness in contemplating the different shapes of leaves of the various kinds of trees plants and herbs there is happiness in examining minutely into the wild flowers as we wander among them', wrote John Clare. Human beings need the beauty of nature for psychological health and a balanced perspective on life. The more our culture is divorced from nature, the more problems arise in illness, hostility, and mental disorders, including depression. Even the Victorians wrote about how the study of natural history contributed to good mental health. The historian Sir George Macaulay Trevelyan knew this for a fact, from his experience of daily walks out with nature in the Northumbrian moors and woods: 'I have two doctors: my right leg and my left.' Disconnection from nature, and ignorance of it, deprives people of elements of delight, solace and fascination that sustain the inner life. Nature Deficit Disorder now has a name – even an acronym, NDD. 'There are a great many ways of holding on to our sanity,' writes Ronald Blythe, 'amidst the vices and follies of the world, though none better than to walk knowledgeably among our native plants'.

'Long live weeds and the wilderness yet', wrote Gerard Manley Hopkins. To saunter in places where wild flowers grow can transform sadness and pain: the word saunter comes from a medieval word for pilgrims to the Holy Land or la Sainte Terre, 'sainterreurs', and these places are holy lands of sorts, replica Gardens of Eden that restore us to wholeness. Wild flowers are more than the sum of their parts, their beauty being one of the profoundest ways in which we connect and communicate with each other at moments of great joy or great grief.

Between My Country—and the others—
There is a sea—
But Flowers—negotiate between us—
As Ministry
EMILY DICKINSON, 1864

THE INTELLIGENCE OF PLANTS

Plants are the only organisms on the planet that can lose up to 90 per cent of their bodies without being killed. This is because they have no irreplaceable organs. Rooted to the spot, plants have evolved to find everything they need, and to defend themselves, while remaining fixed in place. This they do by speaking a chemical language. A plant has three thousand chemicals in its vocabulary (while, as eminent plant biologist Stephano Mancuso remarked, 'the average student has only seven hundred words'). If, he argues, intelligence is the ability to solve problems, then plant intelligence can be defined as the ability to respond in optimal ways to challenges presented by its environment and circumstances.

Plants have evolved both short- and long-term electrical signalling, using neurotransmitter-like chemicals. They have between fifteen and twenty distinct senses, including analogues of our five: smell and taste (they sense and respond to chemicals in the air or on their bodies); sight (they react differently to various wavelengths of light as well as to shadow); touch (a vine or a root 'knows' when it encounters a solid object); and, it has been discovered, sound and volume.

They can also sense volume, nitrogen, phosphorus, salt, various toxins, microbes and chemical signals from neighbouring plants. Roots about to encounter an impenetrable obstacle or a toxic substance change course before they make contact with it. Roots can tell whether nearby roots are self or other and, if other, kin or stranger. Research on plant communication may someday benefit farmers and their crops: it's not impossible that plant-distress chemicals could be used to prime plant defences, reducing the need for pesticides.

In Darwin's work of 1880, *The Power of Movement in Plants*, he wrote that the root tip of a plant 'acts like the brain of one of the lower animals; the brain being seated within the anterior end of the body, receiving impressions from the sense organs and directing the several movements.' Darwin, who regarded nature with respect and wonder, was asking us to think of the plant as a kind of upside-down animal, with its main sensory organs and 'brain' on the bottom, underground, and its sexual organs on top!

WILD FLOWERS IN THE ECOLOGY

Meadows (and basically anywhere wild flowers grow, in hedgerows, verges, woodland, heaths or hillsides) matter at many levels, but they also matter in the wider ecology: wild flowers are a vital thread in the delicate fabric of relationships linking wild plants to the health of an environment threatened by an urbanised culture divorced from the natural world. The ecological chain is only as strong as its weakest link, and in that fact lies our inevitable interdependence on each link - including the smallest. If one breaks, the chain is broken. Small things are essential building blocks of the bigger picture, and wild flowers are fundamental to a fragile but vital relationship with invertebrates, insects and birds in the web of being: each and every one has an individual role to play, with elements that may be vital to the habitat of a goldfinch, or a silver washed fritillary butterfly, or a micro-moth, or a spider, a lizard or an earthworm. As wild plants decline, the ecological pyramid is damaged.

Eighty per cent of inhabitants of some Asian and African countries use herbal medicine for some aspects of primary healthcare: this means five billion people worldwide still rely on traditional plant medicine. It's reckoned that 400 medicinal plants are at risk of extinction from over-collection and deforestation, threatening the discovery of future cures for disease. Wild flowers are an endangered species: habitats are being obliterated by the footprint of an ever-expanding human population and the onslaught of agrochemicals. Ninety-seven per cent of Britain's meadows were lost between the

1930s and 1980s, encroached upon by what John Clare called 'the human ant hill'. Our lanes used to be thick with wild flowers, now the cornflower and the corn cockle have as good as disappeared, but you only have to go to rural Eastern Europe to see what a less populated landscape looks like without agrochemicals – which also, of course, are absorbed into the raw material of our food and drink via the soil and water-table. Mourning such lost landscapes, Roger Deakin, in *Notes from Walnut Tree Farm*, described how:

> *I walk about the common with my imaginary medieval friend. 'The ponds are so shallow. Why are they nearly dried out?' he says, amazed at the state of the grass. 'What's happened to all the cowslips and buttercups – and the hay rattle flowers? Where are the clouds of butterflies that used to rise up before the scythe?*

Many of our wild flowers are ancestors of garden plants – poppy, hellebore, bistort, foxglove and many others – and some wild plants can contribute beauty to a herbaceous border or cottage garden without risk of invasion: cowslips, forget-me-not, borage or bluebells for example can all play their part in a managed plot of land. They are all beautiful: of our 1,407 native species, 20 per cent of them are threatened: let us cherish them, and never take them for granted. Richard Jefferies posits an imaginary scenario:

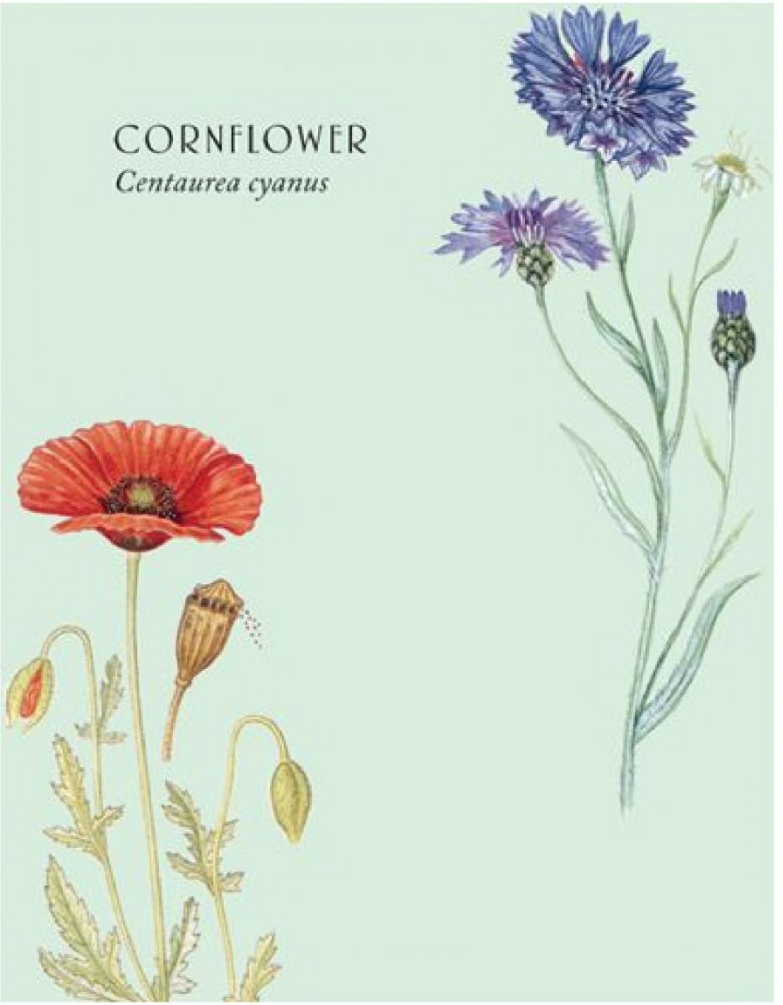
> *If we had never before looked upon the earth, but suddenly came to it man or woman grown, set down in the midst of a summer mead, would it not seem to us a radiant vision? The hues, the shapes, the song and life of birds, above all the sunlight, the breath of heaven, resting on it; the mind would be filled with its glory, unable to grasp it, hardly believing that such things could be mere matter and no more. Like a dream of some spirit land it would appear, scarce fit to be touched lest it should fall to pieces, too beautiful to be watched lest it should fade away.*

Before it does, we must protect disappearing habitats, even if this endeavour seems like 'tilting at impossible windmills', in Miriam Rothschild's words.

'If I live I will write ... a garden of wild Flowers as it shall contain nothing else with quotations from poets and others an English Botany on this plan would be very interesting..'. So wrote John Clare in his *Journal* on Sunday 24 October 1824. But he never did write his garden of wild flowers, to our great loss. He had another scheme that never came to fruition either: in a letter to his publisher John Taylor, he proposed writing the 'biographies of wild flowers'. One hundred and fifty years after his death, this twenty-first-century version tells the stories and histories of the best-known and best-loved of our British flora, and is dedicated to his memory: the genius poet-naturalist John Clare (1793–1864), self-styled 'bard of the wild flowers, Rain-washed and wind-shaken', whose lines from 'Child Harold' conjure a lost landscape:

> *The paigles bloom in showers in grassy close*
> *How sweet to be among their blossoms led*
> *& hear sweet nature to herself discourse*
> *While pale the moon is bering over head*
> *& hear the grazeing cattle softly tred*
> *Cropping the hedgerows newly leafing thorn––*
> *Sounds soft as visions murmured oer in bed*
> *As dusky eve or sober silent morn*
> *For such delights twere happy man was born.*

THE WILD FLOWERS: FROM AGRIMONY TO YARROW



Botanick Studies have a native Tendency to the Support, Comfort, and Delight of Mankind.

CALEB THRELKELD, IRISH FIELD BOTANIST, 1727

AGRIMONY

Agrimonia eupatoria, A. procera

Delicate spikes of yellow stars appear along the verges after midsummer, slender agrimony. Flowering along the lanes of East Anglia during and after harvest, and on grassy roadsides, woodland edges, meadows and hedgerows, agrimony is commoner in the south than in the north of Britain. Medieval monks grew 'the great healer' in infirmary gardens: Walafrid Strabo wrote, in his *Hortulus* or 'Little Garden' of the ninth century, 'here in handsome rows you can see my agrimony. It clothes all the fields with its profusion; it grows wild in the woodland shade. If crushed and drunk, the draught will check the most violent stomach ache.'

Colloquially 'nun of the fields', the French called it Philanthropos and dedicated it to St Guillaume. The leaves could be made into a compress for open wounds – 'being beaten small when it is green, it hath power to cure cuts' – and even wounded deer were supposed to be healed by grazing on agrimony. A further use was found for it: place agrimony under your pillow and you will have a sound night's sleep, as in an eleventh-century poem:

If it be leyd under mann's heed
He shal sleepyn as he were deed,
He shal nevere drede ne wakyn
Till from under his head it be takyn.

Agrimony's generic name eupatoria refers to Mithradates Eupator, king of ancient Persia in the first century BC whose fame as an herbalist rested on his experiments on himself. He took sub-lethal doses of poisonous plants, searching for their antidotes, believing he could find a universal one for all toxins. He so effectively immunised

himself that when he was captured by Pompey and was in danger of being killed, his attempt to poison himself failed (he finally turned to his friend and bodyguard and asked him to kill him with his sword). The 'universal antidote' he is said to have invented became known as the 'mithridate', a semi-mythical cocktail with between fifty and sixty ingredients. It became highly sought after in the Middle Ages and used as a remedy for the plague, among other things. An almond-sized amount taken in wine would, it was claimed, counteract all poisons.

One of the 57 herbs in the Anglo-Saxon 'Holy Salve', agrimony became a potent 'simple', an herb used singly as opposed to being compounded with others. Chaucer recommended 'egrimoyne' for 'a bad back and alle wounds'. It was an ingredient of *eau de arquebusade*, used for staunching wounds, after a fifteenth-century word for musket or arquebus, and recent experiments in China have established its blood-staunching and anti-inflammatory effects. Principally, though, agrimony was used to cure cataracts: its generic name *Agrimonia* comes from the Greek *argemon* meaning a white speck on the cornea, therefore a plant beneficial for the eyes.

Country herbalists claimed it would also cure a range of ills from poisonous snake bites to sore throats, gout to colic, earache to cancers, warts to poor sight and memory loss, cold sores to bites and stings, earaches and colds to chilblains and piles, fevers and pre-menstrual tension to nosebleeds. Regarded as a cure-all, agrimony was specifically, according to John Gerard's *Herbal* of 1597, a fount of all wisdom in matters pertaining to wild flowers, 'good for those that have naughtie livers', a claim most likely by association with the yellow colour of the flowers. Culpeper maintained that it would draw out 'thorns and splinters of wood, nails, or any other such thing gotten into the flesh', and was also 'a most admirable remedy for those whose lives are annoyed either by heat or by cold'.

Place agrimony under your pillow and you will have a sound night's sleep

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A fragrant, faintly apricot-scented tea made from agrimony is known in folk medicine for relieving colds. It can be drunk as a spring tonic and cleanser, or used externally for skin conditions. The plant contains tannins and has astringent and styptic properties: and it is still prescribed today by European herbalists for mild diarrhoea, as a gargle for oral and throat infections, and as a remedy for bedwetting. Agrimony wine was prescribed for colds. The whole plant yields a yellow dye.

With its relative *A. procera*, which is slightly taller and larger, *A. eupatoria* is a perennial member of the rose family. In the language of flowers agrimony stands for faithfulness. It's also known as church steeples, fairy rod, fairy-wand, tea-plant, rats' tails, cockle-bur (from the seeds which hook on to clothing), lemonade flower and liverwort. A perennial pollinated by a variety of small insects (or self-pollinated), agrimony is the food plant of the grizzled skipper and the large grizzled skipper butterflies and the *Stigmella splendissimella* and *aurella* moths. Its relative hemp agrimony (*Eupatorium cannabinum*) is the food plant of five *Lepidoptera* including the hemp-agrimony plume and the lime-speck pug moths.

ALEXANDERS

Smyrnium olusatrum

Shining green and gold along spring hedgerows, especially along the Eastern coastline, beautiful *Smyrnium olusatrum* with its glossy leaves is one of the first umbellifers to appear in spring. The Romans called it parsley of Alexandria (Galen underlining its culinary rather than medicinal value), and it was they who introduced it into Britain. It was eventually planted in medieval infirmary gardens when it was known as rock parsley of Alexandria, *Petroselinum*

alexandrium. A native of the Mediterranean and primarily a shoreline plant, alexanders is still found growing among the ruins of monastic houses.

It was from earliest times an official medicinal herb: fresh juice from the root and seed was used on cuts and wounds in much of Europe until as recently as the 1830s. 'The leaves bruised and applied to any bleeding wound, stoppeth the blood and dryeth up the sore without any griefe', wrote seventeenth-century botanist and herbalist William Coles in his *The Art of Simpling*. Alexanders seed soaked in wine was formerly considered an emmenagogue, to stimulate menstrual bleeding, and the leaves used as an antiscorbutic against scurvy in the days when vitamin C extracts were unavailable. The roots are mildly diuretic, and the bitter taste of the leaves sharpens the appetite.

Alexanders was equally important as a culinary pot-herb from the first until the eighteenth centuries, grown like celery, blanched to remove the bitterness of the mature green parts of the plant. The leaves, upper parts of the roots, and the flower-buds were all eaten until the plant was superseded by celery. It has bright green, three-lobed leaves and yellow-green flower-heads in early spring, which can be steamed and eaten like sprouting broccoli. John Evelyn recommended alexanders for the 'Kitchin-Garden', and in his *Acetaria* of 1699 includes the yellow-green flower-buds as an ingredient for salads: they can be eaten raw and have a pleasant, nutty taste. 'The gentle fresh sprouts, buds, and tops are to be chosen, and the stalks eaten in the spring; and when blanch'd, in winter likewise, with oyl, pepper, salt, etc by themselves, or in composition: They make also an excellent vernal pottage.' He was not the only one to think so: 'Our Allisanders are much used', wrote John Parkinson in his 1640 *Theatricum Botanicum*, 'in the time of Lent, to helpe to digest the crudities and viscous humours gathered in the stomach, by the much use of fish at that time'. Up until the eighteenth century in Ireland, the plant was an ingredient of 'Lenten pottage', a gruel eaten during Lent and made with alexanders, watercress and nettles.

Alexanders has local names of black lovage, wild celery and horse parsley. The plant is native to beautiful wild Macedonia, Alexander the

Great's birthplace: there's even a legend that he discovered it. Alexanders gets its generic name *Smyrnium* from the Greek for 'myrrh', because of its fragrant aroma. *Olus* means 'vegetable', and *atrum* 'black', from the colour of its ripe fruits.

ANGELICA

Angelica archangelica

A flower of the metaphysical, this plant of angelic qualities is endowed with a country name of holy ghost. A subspecies of the wild angelica, *A. sylvestris*, its medicinal properties were allegedly revealed to a monk by the Archangel Michael during an outbreak of plague, hence *archangelica*. It comes into flower around 8 May, the feast day commemorating the apparition of St Michael to a bishop in Apulia in which the Archangel requested that a church be built in honour of the Holy Angels. The divine mysteries have been

celebrated there ever since, and Monte Sant'Angelo at Gargano, the oldest shrine in Western Europe dedicated to St Michael, is now a World Heritage site.

Angelica archangelica grows in damp soil, often near rivers or in low-lying meadows and woods. It grows up to two metres tall, with a hollow stem seized on by children to turn into toy flutes. However, angelica is similar in appearance to several poisonous species such as hogweed, so correct identification is important. The flowers, which blossom from July onwards, are yellowish-white or greenish in colour, and grouped into large globular umbels bearing buff-yellow, flattened seeds. It has finely toothed, serrated leaves, and the starburst flowers are pollinated by a wide variety of insects. The increasingly rare swallowtail butterfly lays its eggs on angelica, as well as its relatives fennel and wild carrot, and the unrelated milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*). Eleven moths are known to feed on angelica, including the white-spotted pug.

Elegant, stately angelica is unique amongst the *Umbelliferae* for its scent, a perfume entirely different from that of its cousins fennel, parsley, anise, caraway and chervil. One ancient writer compares it to musk, another to juniper. It has an incense-like quality and Laplanders crowned their poets with it in the belief that its aroma would inspire verse. Even the roots are fragrant, and they form one of the principal ingredients of the European perfumery industry.

From the tenth century on, angelica was cultivated both as a vegetable and as medicinal plant, achieving popularity particularly in Scandinavia where it grows wild. It has been used there as a flavouring agent from the twelfth century, and the Norwegians still use angelica root in bread-baking. Naturalised in Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Iceland, it's now widely cultivated in France where the long, bright green, fleshy stems are used in confectionery, candied for cake and dessert decoration, and to add flavour to jam. All parts of the plant are edible: angelica leaves can be steamed with fish, or added to spinach, or used sparingly in salads. Blanched, you can eat the stems like celery. Angelica is one of the ingredients used to flavour Chartreuse and Benedictine, as well as Vermouth and Dubonnet. The plant produces a yellow dye.

Laplanders crowned their poets with it in the belief that its aroma would inspire verse

Angelica has other uses too: in his 1905 *Meals Medicinal*, the physician Dr W. T. Fernie wrote, 'The candied stems as sold by our confectioners, are of excellent service to relieve the flatulence of weakly digestion. They smell pleasantly of musk, being a capital tonic, and carminative. Furthermore they are antiseptic.' Chewing the stems does indeed, according to some, reduce flatulence, but Dr Fernie makes further claims: according to him, angelica was a traditional remedy for infectious diseases. He quotes the *Speculum Mundi* of 1643: 'Contagious aire ingendering pestilence infects not those, who in their mouths have taine Angelica, that happy counterbane'.

It has helped smokers to give up tobacco, by chewing on the seeds

This claim was taken up by John Parkinson, last of the great Renaissance herbalists, apothecary to King James I and Royal Botanist to Charles I: 'the whole plant, both leafe, roote and seede, is of an excellent comfortable scent, savour and taste ... [it is] so goode an herbe that there is no part thereof but is of much use'. It was used as a remedy for cholera and poisoning, and in the Great Plague of 1660 people chewed angelica seeds to avoid infection, believing it could cure them. 'It cureth the bitings of madde dogges and al other venomous beasts', declares Gerard, characteristically undermining credibility with overstatement. A cleansing herb, too, and good for the skin, angelica may possibly deter those inclined to overindulgence: 'Angelica taken somewhat freely as a sweetmeat will create 'a disgust for spiritous liquors', as Dr W. T. Fernie put it in the early twentieth century in his *Herbal Simples*. If drink isn't the problem, but you have toothache or bad breath, then Richard Surflet offers this advice in *The*

Countrie Farme of 1600: 'The root put into a hollow tooth asswageth the paine: being chawed, it maketh the breath sweet, and concealeth the smell of garlicke, or any other suche meate which causes an ill breath.' For those with another problem altogether, here's Parkinson again: 'the dryed roots made into pouder, and taken in wine or other drinke, will abate the rage of lust in young persons.'

In folk medicine, angelica has been used to ease bronchitis, to stimulate liver function, and as a remedy for brain and head complaints. It was applied to painful joints, and used for nervousness, vertigo and fatigue. Herbalists knew it as a warming tonic to improve poor circulation, and Laplanders prescribed it for colic, for which it was one of their chief remedies. An extract of the root is anti-inflammatory, and the roots, stems and seeds were used for respiratory complaints. Simply burning the root and inhaling the fumes was found to relax mind and body, simultaneously activating the imagination and relieving depression. It has helped smokers to give up tobacco, by chewing on the seeds instead of applying nicotine patches. 'The consumption of angelica tea temporarily changes the taste [for nicotine]. It calms the nerves and helps in moments of craving.' More fancifully, if you wore angelica around your neck it would act as a charm to protect you from witches and their spells.

Angelica is commonly known as angel plant, wild parsnip, masterwort, Jack jump-about, lingwort, wild celery, bellyache root and Norwegian angelica. It is the plant above all others to have in your garden, according to the contemporary Australian herbalist Harald Tietze: 'Angelica aligns you to walk with your guardian angel. If you have space for only one plant in the garden plant the Angelica.' So I did, and it thrives. So, I hope, does my guardian angel.

BETONY

Stachys officinalis

Thy wild woad on each road we see
And medicinal betony…

'Sell your coat and buy betony' advises plant lore, because this wild flower is as good for the body as it is for the soul, an Italian proverb extolling its qualities: 'May you have more virtues than betony'. It has had extravagant claims made for it since Ancient Greece and the first-century Roman physician Pliny. Antonius Musa, physician to the emperor Augustus, asserted that betony would cure no less than 47 disorders. Called holy salve and believed to ward off diseases, it continued to be much used by Anglo-Saxon apothecaries. In the sixteenth century William Turner wrote, 'It would seem a miracle to tell what experience I have had of it ... [It] is appropriated to the head and eyes, for the infirmities whereof it is excellent, as also for the breast and lungs; being boiled in milk, and drunk, it takes away pains in the head and eyes ... Some write it will cure those that are possessed with devils, or frantic, being stamped and applied to the forehead.' More prosaically, Gerard considered 'it maketh a man to pisse well', and in his Herbal of 1597 gives it as 'a remedy against the bitings of madde dogges and venemous serpents, being drunk, and also applied to the hurts, and is most singular against poisons.' Culpeper is more measured: 'A very precious herb, that's certain, and most fitting to be kept in a man's house both in Syrup, Conserve, Oyl, ointment and Plaister.'

Betony's effectiveness against a hangover seems a general favourite in folk medicine, so long as the plant was cut in August but not with an iron tool. *The Grete Herball* of 1526 even recommends to 'take and eat betony ... and you shall not be drunk that day', also giving a remedy of betony in wine 'for them that ben to ferfull'. Betony was prescribed as an antidote to madness, and the Anglo-Saxon *Leech Book* of Bald declares 'it shields him against monstrous nocturnal visitors and against frightful visions and dreams'. Some people wore amulets of betony for protection, or placed one under the pillow at night.

In herbal medicine, betony was an ingredient of 'Pistoja powder', given as a remedy for backache and lumbago, arthritis and gout. Betony tea or tincture was prescribed as a nerve tonic to calm, to relax and to relieve stress, and given for insomnia. Fresh betony leaves laid

on the forehead and covered with a damp cloth would ease a nervous headache, even a migraine. The herb is good for concentration and memory, and was given as a tonic for underweight children. A fifteenth-century manuscript says 'the juyce of betayne medled with oyl of rosys' would heal you of 'many divers siknesse'. Dried betony is an ingredient in herbal tobacco and snuff, together with coltsfoot and eyebright.

Potent in medicine, betony acquired a reputation as a magical and holy plant, and one of its names is bishop's wort. Betony was frequently grown in monastery gardens as well as in churchyards where it can still be found, grown to protect the living from ghosts of the dead. Wounded animals (particularly stags) that ate betony were healed, and medieval folklore tells how it was believed to affect snakes. Betony had power over witchcraft and wicked spirits too, so if you plant betony in the garden the occupants of your house will come to no harm.

A downy perennial with an upright habit, betony grows 30 to 60cm tall in high summer, with light purple flowers in dense whorls on a spike, in woods and hedgerows all over England (but not in Scotland). It came to England with the Normans in the eleventh century. Also widely known also as wood betony, in French it is *bétoine*, and in Old English was known as betayne or beteyne. The generic *Stachys* comes from the Greek for 'a spike', after the flowerhead, and *officinalis* means that it was listed as an official medicinal herb. 'Betony' may come from the Vettones, pre-Roman Celtic peoples of the Iberian peninsula who are said to have discovered betony's properties. Or, it derives from two Celtic words: *bew* meaning 'head', and *ton* meaning 'improve'.

Betony then is a woundwort, closely related to Hedge Woundwort (*Stachys sylvatica*), a wound-healer with a local name of all-heal: Culpeper regarded hedge woundwort as 'second to none' as a vulnerary or wound herb, since it heals tissues, staunches bleeding, is antiseptic, antispasmodic and sedative. It is even uplifting to the spirits: 'a distilled water of the flowers makes the heart merry, to make a good colour in the face, and to make the vitall spirits more fresh and lively.' A standard remedy of the country medicine-chest for cuts and minor

wounds, hedge woundwort was made into a poultice of ointment and is now known to contain a vaporisable antiseptic oil. Gerard called it clown's all heal, and tells this tale: 'It chanced that a poore man in mowing of Peason did cut his leg with a sithe, wherein he made a wound to the bones, and withall very large and wide, and also with great effusion of bloud; the poor man crept unto this herbe, which he bruised with his handes, and tied a great quantity of it unto the wound with a piece of his shirt, which presently staunched the bleeding, and ceased the paine, insomuch that the poore man presently went to his days work againe, and so did from day to day, without resting one day until he was perfectly whole, which was accomplished in a few dayes... I saw the wound, and offered to heale the same fro charitie; which he refused, saying that I could not heale it so well as himselfe: a clownish answer I confesse, without any thanks to me for my goodwill; whereupon I have named it Clownes Woundwort.'

Hedge woundwort is the food plant of seven moths including the brindled plume, the small rivulet and the beautiful golden.

BIRD'S FOOT TREFOIL

Lotus corniculatus

'Yellow with birdfoot trefoil are the grass glades' wrote George Meredith of this abundant grassland wild flower, which, with its three-lobed leaves, is a symbol of the Trinity. Known as crow-toes, too, and God Almighty's thumb and finger, bird's foot trefoil has attracted over 70 seemingly unrelated folk names including lady's shoes and stockings, butter and eggs, bacon and eggs (after the red flushes on the yellow flowers), hop o' my thumb and goblin's fingers. Its seed pods shaped like little horns (hence *corniculatus*) account for

animal's claws, toes and feet, feet of the evil cat or fingers of the devil. These pods resemble a bird's claw, too, hence bird's claw, and its commonest name of all, bird's foot.

'Trefoil' describes the crowning leaf, the others being set in pairs up the stem. The dramatic red and black six-spot burnet moth nectars on the flowers, and the plant is pollinated by bees or wasps. In all, bird's foot trefoil supports 132 different species of insect – one of nature's 'endless facts most beautiful', to paraphrase Darwin. As well as the six-spot burnet, it is an important wild flower for twenty-one other moths including the latticed heath and the chalk carpet. It is the primary food plant of the green hairstreak, dingy skipper, clouded yellow, short-tailed blue, silver-studded blue and wood white butterflies, and the secondary of the common blue. bird's foot trefoil has been grown in the past as a forage plant for pasture, hay and silage.

To the Romans, to wear a crown made with trefoil leaves was a high honour

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To the Romans, to wear a crown made with trefoil leaves was a high honour, presumably associated with war, since it's one of only a very few flowers to have negative connotations in the language of flowers, standing for revenge or retribution. Yet its Latin name means 'lily of the lotus-eaters', and Victorian nature writer Richard Jefferies waxes lyrical about this little flower. In *The Open Air* he wrote, 'In the mind all things are written in pictures – there is no alphabetical combination of letters and words; all things are pictures and symbols. The bird's-foot lotus is the picture to me of sunshine and summer, and of that summer in the heart which is known only in youth, and then not alone. No words could write that feeling: the bird's foot trefoil writes it.'

Dedicated to the memory of
'the bard of the wild flowers'
John Clare
(1793–1864)

and in loving remembrance of my grandfather
Harold Frederick Page (1882–1983)
countryman and naturalist

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The recipes and remedies in this book are historical, no longer used and are in no way an invitation to try out past practice.