

Wild origins *Pat Collison*

There is an old saying that a heavy crop of berries (hawthorn, rose hips, blackberries etc.) is a warning of a hard winter to come. That is rubbish of course, the plants are simply responding to conditions prior to their fruiting. They cannot predict the future - though coincidence often persuades otherwise. Nevertheless, the folklore societies must have been rubbing their hands together and chanting 'We told you so - the hedgerows know!' as the November and December blizzards brought chaos to much of the country. I had picked several pounds of wild damsons and bullace (now safely stored in the freezer to provide fillings for pies and crumbles), and the bumper crops of sloes may have had something to do with the rapid disappearance of bottles of gin from the supermarket shelves. But even these tasty treats and the happy memories of the berry-decked hedgerows were small comfort in the cold, house-bound weeks of white-clad winter that followed. 'Dreaming of a White Christmas'? Bah! Humbug!

What will spring 2011 have in store, and will it be late arriving after all that ice and snow? I look forward eagerly to the first white wood anemones peeping through the carpet of last year's fallen leaves. The white anemones are always first, soon followed by the pale pink ones and lastly the deeper pink, often with double flowers. Next comes a dense compact clump of deep purple *Viola odorata*. In the woods the bluebells begin their spectacular display in April, massed together in a broad glade and spreading in drifts and small groups throughout the wooded area. Everybody loves the bluebells and they certainly are a beautiful sight, but few folk visit the early purple orchids, hidden away beside unfrequented woodland tracks, their deep red-purple flowers held above black spotted-leaves, or the spectacular clumps of rose pink pyramidal orchids that flower in the meadow in late June half hidden among broad drifts of yellow mellilot - perhaps not the most sympathetic colour scheme.

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While the meadow comes into its flowery best with buttercups, clovers, vetches, geraniums, daisies, wild scabious and so many more, the woods have almost finished their floral display. The dense canopy of oak, ash, birch and cherry leaves discourages most of the summer flowers, and brambles and stinging nettles flourish; although I grumble about them, I must concede that they play useful roles as cover for small birds, nesting sites for wood mice, and nurseries for butterflies and spiders! Red admiral, peacock, and tortoiseshell are just some of the well known species that choose to lay their eggs on nettles, ragwort, garlic mustard, thistles, alexanders, willowherb and vetches, all flourishing along the wood edge, making an ideal location for anybody who enjoys butterfly and beetle (and spider, caterpillar and even mouse) spotting..

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Over the years numerous wild plants
have found homes in my garden. Some
have been planted deliberately, others
have sneaked in while I wasn't looking,
so to speak. Amongst the latter the
most unwelcome are cleavers (*Galium
aparine*) and wood avens (*Geum
urbanum*). Both have enjoyed a popula-

tion explosion in recent years in woods and local gardens, their
tenaciously hook-covered seeds no doubt carried on the fur of squir-
rels and foxes whose numbers have also increased alarmingly.

The ‘wildings’ of which I approve include wood anemones, violets,
lady's smock (*Cardamine pratensis*) wood sorrel (*Oxalis acetosella*), herb
Robert (*Geranium robertianum*), common foxgloves, garlic mustard and
red veined dock - a well coloured form with leaves conspicuously
veined in glowing crimson. Like some of the other wild residents, the
dock leaves are edible, but they are very bitter and need cooking. I did
try them once and was not impressed. Garlic mustard, on the other
hand, is high on my list of favourite salad leaves, picked young and
added to salads and sandwiches its garlic flavour it is ideal for those
who find raw garlic cloves a bit overpowering. Wood sorrel leaves are
also tasty (used sparingly as they contain oxalates). In his book ‘Food
for Free’ Richard Mabey likens their flavour to that of grape skins,
which in small quantities add a tangy zest to a green salad. Garlic
mustard also wins points for attracting orange tip butterflies to the
garden. It is the favourite food plant of their caterpillars (so I have to
examine my salad leaves carefully).

In the past five years foxes, squirrels and arthritis have changed the
face of this garden, and I have to accept and live
with the changes, though I mourn the loss of so
many favourite plants. Cottage gardens began
with our native species, and perhaps they will
attract fewer destructive attacks from foxes - and
more visits from the butterflies and bumble bees.

