

## Summer's Natural Abundance: the Folklore and Uses of Plants

What comes to mind when you think of the summer time? Maybe its lazy afternoons sitting in the park or perhaps you prefer sunning yourself on the beach. In the natural world summer is the time of abundance and fruitfulness. Flowers are in bloom, leaves are green and fruits and berries are just starting to ripen.

Summer is very much associated with fertility and magic. The most magical of these days must be the Summer Solstice (21 June) and Midsummer's Day (24 June) which used to be on the same day before the introduction of the Julian and Gregorian calendars. This is one of the times of year when associations with magic, fairies and dancing are at their strongest; as Shakespeare knew when he wrote "A Midsummer Night's Dream". In pre-Christian times people used to light bonfires to worship the sun, a custom still practiced today by modern druids. Towards the end of the summer is the Celtic festival of Lammastide (1 August) which celebrates the first day of the harvest.



Druids at Stonehenge

## The Summer Festival

Festivals are very much a part of modern summers. Music festivals abound, including Glastonbury festival in June and the Notting Hill Carnival at the end of August; with a whole host of others in between. And it's not just music festivals; plenty of traditional summer customs are still practiced. Stonehenge still pulls in revellers for the sun rise on the eve of the summer solstice. Other old customs include Rush Bearing, a ceremony associated with renewing the rushes on the stone floors of churches, and usually performed on the saint's day of the church.

Well Dressings are popular in parts of Derbyshire and Staffordshire. Here springs and wells are dressed with pictures made from plants and flowers, usually but not always, with a religious theme. The origins are unknown but thought to go back to water worship and as a result were banned by the church.



Well Dressing in Derbyshire

Other local customs include Swan Upping, which dates back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, on the river Thames in July. This involves a colourful ceremony where the swans are marked to distinguish whether they belong to either the monarch or one of the local guilds. Nowadays, swans are marked to monitor the population rather than identify who can eat them.

A more unusual and sinister custom called Burning Bartle is held in West Witton, Wensleydale. On the Saturday after St Bartholomew's day a guy like effigy called the Bartle, stuffed with rags and with electric bulbs for eyes, is paraded around the village pubs, soaked in paraffin, stabbed and then set alight. This custom is said to commemorate the death of a village thief. Finally, not forgetting Morris dancing which goes on all over the summer, and involves men and women waving hankies, hitting sticks and jangling bells whilst wearing colourful costumes.



Sunrise Morris in Cornwall

There are many plants flourishing in the summer; trees are in full leaf, and blossom can still to be seen on some trees such as the elder and lime, (both of which can be used to make herbal teas). Summer flowers such as clover, wild roses, heather, poppies, daisy, rosebay willow and foxgloves are flourishing. Towards the end of summer mushrooms start to appear and fruits, such as wild strawberries, raspberries, gooseberries and blackberries are ripening.

For this article I have chosen five common wild plants that thrive in the UK to demonstrate how native wild plants can be used in food, cosmetics and medicine.

**WARNING:** If you are thinking of picking any of the wild plants in this article make sure that you can correctly identify the plant as some wild plants are poisonous.

### **Elder – God’s Stinking Tree**

The elder tree (*sambucus nigra*), known in some parts of the country by the names of Judas tree, Witch wood and God’s Stinking tree. This common shrub, growing in hedgerows, woodland and wastelands, can be identified by its scrubby looking wood and small green leaves. In summer it is covered with small sprays of flowers and in autumn with dark red berries.



Elder in boom

### **The elder tree in folklore**

Elder has long been associated with magic especially Goddess worship and superstitions regarding witches. In folklore it is associated with both good and bad luck. It is linked with death, and it is often found in churchyards. Elder is also credited as the wood of the cross and the tree from which Judas Iscariot hung himself. Elder’s bad reputation gave rise to the belief that burning the tree was thought to bring death and destruction. This idea goes back much further than Christianity. It was thought that spirits lived in the tree and anyone gathering the fruits of the tree was required to ask permission from ‘Lady Elder’ before doing so. The reference to the tree as ‘witch wood’ is taken from the belief that witches could turn themselves into elder trees and that they flew on sticks of elder. Oddly, elder could be also be used as protection from witches. A tree planted near the house would protect the inhabitants from witchcraft, evil and lightening. Elder leaves strewn on the floor of a flea infested house would drive away the fleas and crops whipped with elder branches would not suffer from pests.

### **The uses of Elder**

Despite its dubious reputation, elder is very handy, as the most parts of the tree can be used in some way. Herbalists use it in high blood pressure medicine and as a mild

diuretic. Other uses are as treatments for cold and hay fever. In skin care the infused flowers it can be used for dry sensitive skin as a facial wash.

The flowers are abundant in the summer and can be eaten as fritters dipped in batter and fried or made into wines and cordials.

### **Elderflower Champagne**

This is a non-alcoholic drink made without yeast as the elderflowers contain natural yeast which makes the liquid fizz.

6 heads of elderflower  
1 lemon – peeled and juiced  
1.5 kg sugar  
1 tbsp wine vinegar.

1. Soak the elderflower, lemon juice and peel with the sugar and wine vinegar in a gallon of water for 24 hours.
2. Then strain out the flowers and peel.
3. Bottle in plastic bottles, not glass as the liquid is very active and can break the glass. (I know this from experience – it makes a real mess.)

Leave for at least 2 weeks before drinking.

### **Comfrey – The Healing Plant**

The comfrey plant (*symphytum officinale*) is commonly known as Knitbone, Bruisewort and Allheal due to its healing properties. It grows around riverbanks, waste ground and waysides in damp shady places. Comfrey is a large plants growing to around 150 – 200 cm high, identified by its dark green furry leaves and white to purple flowers which bloom all summer.



Comfrey in flower

### **Comfrey in folklore**

In folklore comfrey is credited with some bizarre magical properties. Apparently, bathing in comfrey leaves could restore your virginity. Traditionally, comfrey was used in travel magic and given to bards and minstrels to protect them in their wanderings.

### **The uses of comfrey**

As its traditional names suggest comfrey is utilised in the healing of wounds as an ointment or salve. The roots can be mashed and used to set bones in a similar way to plaster of Paris. In cosmetics comfrey leaf infusion is used as a skin calming lotion. Comfrey has many other diverse uses such as in animal feed and compost.

Comfrey can be substituted for spinach in curries and other recipes or cooked as a vegetable.

### **Comfrey Balm**

Here is a recipe for an all purpose balm for use on skin as a moisturiser.

100 ml good quality olive oil  
2 tbsp fresh comfrey leaves (or 1 dried)  
2 tbsp fresh lavender flowers (or 1 dried)  
2 tbsp fresh calendula flowers (or 1 dried)  
2 tbsp grated or granulated beeswax

1. Infuse the leaves in the oil on a windowsill in a jar for around 2 weeks.
2. Strain out the oil by pouring through a strainer.
3. Pour into a double boiler with the beeswax.
4. Stir until the beeswax is melted.
5. Pour the mixture into jars.

Can be stored for up to 6 months in the fridge.

### **Wild Thyme – The Courage Giving Herb**

Wild thyme (*thymus drucei*) is also known as creeping thyme is very similar to the common variety of garden thyme. It grows in grassy chalk and limestone areas and has small green leaves with small pinkish purple flowers in summer.



Thyme in flower

### **Thyme in folklore**

Thyme has a reputation for bestowing the wearer with courage and strength. Ancient Roman soldiers bathed in thyme before battle and Crusaders wore it into battle. Thyme beer is supposed to be a cure for shyness, although I suspect that may be more due to the beer than the thyme! It is also credited with being able to help clear the head. Thyme has a grim association with murdered men and in some places sprigs of thyme are thrown into graves.

### **The uses of thyme**

In herbal medicines thyme is used as an antiseptic and is often added to throat sweets as well as to cure athlete's foot, (its name means 'fumigation'). In cosmetics it is used as a rinse, in a similar way to rosemary, to make the hair shine, and its antiseptic qualities make it ideal for spotty skins that need to be kept clean.

Wild thyme can be used in the same way as garden thyme, except more can be used as it has a more delicate flavour. In Scandinavia thyme is used as a flavour to schnapps.

### **Thyme Toad in the Hole**

8 sausages, pork or vegetarian  
100g plain flour  
1 medium egg  
300ml skimmed milk  
2 tsp wholegrain mustard  
1 tsp fresh thyme leaves

1. Preheat the oven to 200C/Gas 6/fan oven 180C. Grill the sausages until cooked.
2. While they are cooking, make the batter. Sift the flour into a bowl, drop the egg in to the centre and beat in the milk a little at a time until it makes a smooth batter. Stir in the mustard and thyme and season.
3. Pour the batter quickly into the tin and cook in the oven for 40 minutes until the batter is risen and golden.

### **Heather – The Purple Carpet of the Moorland**

Heather (*calluna vulgaris*), meaning happiness, grows in acid soils on heaths and moorlands. It is a shrub, growing up to 3ft tall with wiry stems and small green leaves with white, pink or purple flowers in summer.



Heather in bloom

### **Heather in folklore**

Heather is supposed to bring luck; especially white heather, possibly because of its scarcity or because it is supposed to grow on the grave of fairies. This folklore was popularised during the Victorian times when Scottish highlanders were said to pluck a sprig of white heather whenever they passed one. Heather's association with luck is also attributed to being worn by the victor during battle. 'Lucky heather' is often sold by Gypsies and Travellers.

### **The uses of Heather**

Heather plants have numerous uses as thatching, brooms or ropes and the flowers of heather can be used to treat cystitis. Most of the cosmetic uses involve heather blossom honey, which is seen as one of the best honeys, rather than the actual plant.

### **Heather Ale**

Heather ale has been brewed in Scotland for around 3000 years and was used instead of hops as they would not grow in Scotland.

1lb Malt Extract  
4 oz honey  
3 pints heather blossoms  
1 gallon water  
1.5 tsp baking yeast or a pint of ale yeast starter

1. Boil the heather blossoms in some water.
2. Add the malt extract and honey.
3. Add water to make up 1 gallon.
4. Re-boil.
5. Wait for it to cool down to about blood temperature, activate yeast and add it to the liquid.
6. Pour into a fermenting barrel.
7. After about 4-5 days, transfer to bottles, taking care not to transfer the sediment.
8. Cork bottles and store in a cool place until it clears (about 4-5 days).

It is then ready for drinking.

### **Wild Strawberry – Food of the Goddess**

The wild strawberry (*fragaria vesca*) is similar to the alpine strawberry and much smaller than the cultivated variety. It grows in grassy banks, open woods and heaths. It is a small low creeping plant with white flowers in spring and small red fruits in summer.



Strawberry fruits

### **The Strawberry in folklore**

In folklore gardeners are supposed to give the first strawberry of the season to 'the birds' or 'gods' of the strawberry patch to ensure a good harvest. Strawberries were associated with Venus, the goddess of love, as they are heart shaped and red.

### **The uses of strawberries**

In herbal medicine strawberry leaves are infused and drunk as teas to help circulation, and are included in sweets for coughs and sore throats. For a natural tooth whitener,

mash up a strawberry and mix with baking powder, then rub your teeth with the mixture. Surprisingly it doesn't stain them red but make them nice and clean.

### **Strawberry champagne cocktail**

Here is one of my own recipes, and a great drink for celebrations.

$\frac{3}{4}$  part champagne or cava

$\frac{1}{4}$  strawberry juice or liquor, or mashed strawberries

6 wild strawberries to garnish

1. Take a champagne (or pint) glass, pour in the strawberry juice and top up with champagne.
2. Drop in the wild strawberries which will float to the top and enjoy.