



Common Plants of the Bog and its Environs Traditional Uses and Folklore

By Kathleen Connolly

This article is designed to help identify plants on the bog walk and its environs and to give a general overview of their traditional uses. Today these so called “weeds” are a valuable asset in the fight to protect and promote biodiversity. Leave aside the strimmer and appreciate the beauty of the wild. The plants in this article are named in this order: Common, Botanical/Latin and Irish names. In previous times plants were the only source of “medicine” or remedies for injuries or illnesses. We see echoes of this today; for example the use of dock leaves to counteract a nettle sting, comfrey being known as “knit bone” in certain areas. It is interesting to note how many plants were deemed to be useful in staunching bleeding. The suffix “wort” appears in the names of a number of plants; its origins lie in the Old English word “wyr” signifying a plant, root or herb considered to be of beneficial use. Initially plants were harvested from the wild as they grew, later herbalists began to grow “physic” or herb gardens. Traditionally the knowledge they possessed was handed down within the family over many years, eventually this led to families who were specifically associated with medicine.

In Gaelic Ireland all the major chiefs had a physician; a hereditary position which was usually served by the same family over generations. They had an in depth knowledge of native plants and their uses but they were neither isolated nor insular. These physicians (líaigh) were using the best medical works available on the continent, translating works from Latin to Irish. The Book of O’Lees / Book of Hy Brazil belonged to the Uí Laidhe family, hereditary physicians in Connacht. It is an Irish translation of an Arabic text written in Baghdad by Ibn Jazlah, an Arab physician, in the eleventh century. It was translated into Latin in Sicily in 1280 and from that into Irish circa 1450 – almost 100 years before it was translated into German in 1533 – the second European vernacular into which it was translated. Notable medical families in Connacht were the O’Lees and the O’Canavans (both of whom served the O’Flahertys), the O’Kearneys of Mayo and the O’Tullys. (*Irish Times*, 4 Feb 2014)

The Brehon Laws had regulations covering the role of líagh/physicians, herbs and medicine. It was required that a líagh's bag contain numerous small compartments to keep his herbs separate. Usually it was an offence to gather wild fruit and herbs on another's land without permission. A fine to the value of two and a half milk cows was applied to anyone who took wild garlic, seaweed or wild apples from private land. A person was however allowed to gather medicinal herbs where ever they grew, provided they were required for an invalid. Wild plants that provided food were also covered by the Brehon Laws; one example being the requirement of a tenant to provide his chieftain with a "crimfeis" or "garlic feast" each springtime. The feast consisted of wild garlic mixed with cheese and milk. Failure to do so resulted in fines equivalent to one and a half milk cows.

Any information relating to uses of the following plants in folk/herbal medicine is given purely from a historical perspective and general interest . Readers are asked not to try making their own herbal remedies rather if interested to consult a qualified herbalist or seek out a reputable course on herbal medicine.



Sphagnum Moss
Sphagnum
Sfagnam

Sphagnum Moss is the “bog builder” without it bogs would not exist. The mosses form a living surface on top of the bog. They can form hummocks of tightly packed plants or grow as single plants in bog pools. There are 24 species of Sphagnum Moss in Ireland. Because of the acidic nature of the ecosystem plants decay very slowly, gradually the weight fresh moss growing on top of the partially decayed layers compresses them to form peat. Sphagnum moss plays a vital role in the retention of water in the bog. It can hold 20 times its own weight in water. This is the reason that a healthy bog feels spongy to walk on. This can play a vital part in the control of flooding. Bogs are a carbon sink, vital in fighting global warming, retaining CO₂ from the atmosphere within the peat, often being likened to Ireland’s rainforest. The decayed parts of the plant provides a growing medium for other bog plants such as heathers. Thousands of microscopic plants and animals including algae, desmids, worms and heliozoans make their home within the carpet of moss; these in turn are food for all the other organisms such as dragonflies, pond skaters, water beetles and frogs who live on the bog. Because of its absorbency Sphagnum moss was used as a dressing for wounds as far back as the Battle of Clontarf in 1014. It can absorb not only above the wound but laterally around the sides. During WW1 there was an industry here harvesting the moss for export to England where it was used as a surgical dressing by the army. In some instances it was soaked with raw garlic juice to enhance its properties.



Heather/Ling
Calluna vulgaris
Fraoch mór

Heather was used as a hot poultice for treating chilblains, it was also macerated and used in the treatment of arthritis and rheumatism. An infusion of the flowering stalks was believed to treat coughs and colds. It was also used to make the traditional besom broom prior to the advent of the shop bought sweeping brush. *Today Irish heather honey is highly prized, it has been proven to be rich in antioxidants with health benefits similar to manuka honey, but without the air miles.*



Cross-leaved Heath
Erica tetralix
Fraoch naoscaí

Cross-leaved Heath is rich source of nectar and pollen making it valuable to bees. It was used to make teas, flavour beers and as source of yellow/orange dye.



Bog Cotton
Eriophorum angustifolium
Ceannbhán

Bog Cotton blooms in April and May its fluffy white heads turn the bogs into a sea of white. It has channels in its roots which work like a snorkel to draw air from the parts of the plant that are growing above the peat. It was used to stuff pillows, to make candle wicks and as tinder/kindling for lighting household fires.



Bogbean
Menyanthes trifoliata
Báchrán

Bogbean with its distinctive flowers was used to treat scurvy, rheumatoid arthritis, loss of appetite and indigestion, skin diseases and ague (fever with chills). It was also used to make a type of herb tobacco. It is very bitter tasting and was used instead of hops in brewing.



Bog Asphodel
Narthecium ossifragum
Sciollam na móna

Bog Asphodel was known as the “bone breaker” in times gone by it was believed that animals who grazed on it had weakened bones and suffered breaks as a result; hence “ossifragum” in the Latin name. Research now shows that there are certain chemicals in the plant which may have an adverse effect on bone density. It’s known as “crupanny grass” in Donegal as farmers believed it caused “crupanny” i.e. foot-rot in sheep. It is toxic to sheep and cattle causing to kidney problems. It was also used as a source of yellow dye.



Bog Myrtle
Myrica gale
Roideóg

Bog Myrtle has a fresh lemon scent and is a natural insect repellent it was used by people working on the bogs as such. A sprig of the plant would be tucked into a person’s headgear or else the leaves were bruised between the fingers to release the plant’s oils then rubbed on the skin. It was used as a flavouring in the brewing of beer. It was also believed to help with fever, liver problems and stomach aches. Bog Myrtle oil is reputed to be good for skin complaints such as acne and is sometimes used in handmade soaps. Herbalists valued it for its antibacterial properties, it is similar to Tea Tree oil in many respects. *Photo shows the plant at the “drupe” (fruit/seed) stage.* In parts of Ireland it was used instead of palm on Palm Sunday and in Achill it provided the ashes used on Ash Wednesday. Valued under the Brehon Laws for its use as a yellow dye; damaging the plants resulted in a fine. Bog Myrtle was dried and place in linen presses to repel moths and in some areas placed in beds to repel fleas. It was also burned in household fires; the smoke was fragrant and again this may have helped repel insects. The fruits were used as flavouring for soups and stews.



Butterwort
Pinguicula vulgaris
Bodán meascáin

Butterwort is a small plant with purple coloured flowers, it is carnivorous it eats insects and flies. The insect lands on the sticky green basal leaves which then roll inwards while releasing an enzyme which dissolves the insect providing nutrients which the plant absorbs. There is a larger version of the plant which is not as common. The plant was used to curdle milk, hence the name. Fresh butterwort leaves were placed in a container and the milk poured over them and allowed to sit for a few days until it became a thick yogurt like substance when it was ready for use. Other uses included a treatment for coughs and being used as poultice. The leaves were one of the ingredients in a cream used for cows udders.



Sundew
Drosera rotundifolia
Drúchtín móna

Sundew is tiny, another carnivorous bog plant, the leaves have a little dew like drop at the tip, this is actually a sticky glue, when an insect lands on the leaf it is unable to escape and the leaf closes around it. The Sundew releases enzymes to dissolve the insect and absorb its nutrients. Sundews were used to treat whooping cough, bronchitis and asthma. The juice was said to remove corns and warts and was believed to curdle milk.



Reindeer Moss
Cladonia rangiferina
Caonach réinphianna

Reindeer Moss is a lichen rather than a moss; lichens are a microscopic alga living in a symbiotic relationship with a fungus. Lichens have neither roots nor a protective “skin” that retains water, in the way regular plants do. It’s metabolism activates within minutes of being dampened by rain or dew and deactivates when it’s tissues dry out. This lack of “skin” makes it susceptible to aerial pollutants and thus indicator of air quality. Healthy lichen growth equals clean air. Reindeer are among the few animals that have developed an enzyme to digest it. It is a food source for them over the winter in the Scandinavian countries. 10,000 years ago reindeer also roamed Ireland. At one time reindeer moss was smoked like tobacco and was said to be a mild hallucinogenic; maybe it gave rise to the idea that reindeer could fly.....



Tormentil
Potentilla erecta
Néalfartach

Tormentil was used as a treatment for ulcers and sores that weren’t healing, and also to treat cholera, smallpox, fevers, diarrhoea and to remove warts. It was believed useful in treating inflamed eyes and sore throats. It was also used in the tanning and dyeing of leather, giving the leather a red colour.



Common Milkwort
Polygala vulgaris
Lus an bhainne

Milkwort was used to make a tea; it was said that the plant had diuretic qualities and was capable of causing people to sweat toxins from the body.



Black Medic
Medicago lupulina
Dúmheidic

Black Medic is named for its seed pods which turn black when ripened. It is a valuable source of nectar for insects and butterflies especially the Common Blue Butterfly. It is also a nitrogen fixer/soil enricher. In herbal medicine it was used a mild laxative. It is rich in calcium, phosphorous, potassium and magnesium, is antibacterial and promotes clotting.



Early Marsh-orchid
Dactylorhiza incarnata ssp.
pulchella
Margairlín álainn

There are 30 species of orchid native to Ireland. All of them are terrestrial (ground) growing with very specific habitats. They are usually found on undisturbed soil with low nutrient content and little competing vegetation. Some prefer wet acidic locations, others dry alkaline soils. They flower from May to late July by which time their seeds will have ripened and been scattered by the wind. The foliage withers and its nutrients are stored in underground tubers until the following spring.



Meadowsweet
Filipendula ulmaria
Arigead luachra

Meadowsweet with its feathery flowers and beautiful scent is a familiar sight along roadsides and in meadows and damp areas. Arigead Luachra the Irish/Gaelic name translates as “silver rushes.” It was also known as Críos Cúchulainn (Cúchulainn’s Belt). Other names included Meadow Queen, Meadwort and Medesweet, the latter refer to its use as a flavouring in mead a drink made with fermented honey. In England it was used for beer making. Meadowsweet with watermint and vervain was one of the herbs most sacred to the Druids. In Irish mythology Áine the goddess of the land was said to have given meadowsweet its scent. In Co. Galway the folk belief held that if a person was wasting away under a fairy spell placing meadowsweet flowers under their bed guaranteed they’d be cured by morning. It was used as a strewing herb on floors mixed with rushes to give warmth underfoot, mask smells and for its insect repelling qualities. According to the herbalist Gerard the scent was said to make people joyful and delight the senses. In Ireland Meadowsweet was used to scour milk vessels. In 1838 salicylic acid was discovered and meadowsweet sap was found to be a natural source; without the side-effect of stomach irritation that comes with the modern version. Today we know salicylic acid as aspirin. When Bayer formulated acetylsalicylic acid in 1899 they called it “asprin” after the old botanical name for meadowsweet – *Spirea ulmaria*. Traditionally it was used to treat everything from digestive disorders, sore throats, arthritis, rheumatism, headaches and flu. It yields the following dyes depending on the part used: roots – black, leaves – blue, flowers – yellow.



St. John's Wort
Hypericum perforatum
Lus na Maighdine Muire

St. John's Wort botanical name comes from the Greek "*hyper eikon*" meaning "*against an apparition.*" In Ireland it was a valued medicinal herb. Irish folk beliefs held that it protected against evil and the powers of darkness and had the power to expel demons. Together with Yarrow it was hung up in Irish homes on June 23 (St. John's Eve) for this very reason. It was also given to children on this date to prevent illness. It was traditionally used to stem bleeding and heal wounds and burns. It has both antibacterial and antiviral properties. In ancient times soldiers, including the Crusaders, carried it into battle with them for this very reason. It was a well-known as herbal remedy for mild depression, anxiety and tension.



Yarrow
Achillea millefolium
Athair thalún

Yarrow is known as "Master of the Blood", "Soldiers' Herb" and "Mille Foil". It is an ancient herb that is still used in present day herbal medicine. The botanical name comes from the Greek legend of Achilles, it was said that during the Battle of Troy the leaves of Yarrow were used to heal wounded warriors. It was sacred to the Druids who used it in rituals to divine seasonal weather. It was believed to protect against evil and on St. John's Eve (June 23) was hung up in Irish homes together with St John's Wort for that very reason. The plant is very resistant to drought and its network of extensive roots binds loose soil together preventing erosion. Yarrow was always viewed as an excellent healing remedy; it possesses antiseptic, astringent and anti-inflammatory properties. It was used as a first aid dressing during World War 1. Yarrow was used to treat wounds, burns and skin conditions. It was also used fevers, colds, flu and catarrh. In Sweden it was known as Field Hop; used in brewing the beer was considered more intoxicating than when regular hops were used.



Horsetail
Equisetum arvense
Broimín

Horsetail is unique, a survivor from prehistoric times it was around when dinosaurs roamed the earth. It doesn't flower but carries spores similar to ferns which it is related to. The spiky fronds feel rough to the touch due to the large amounts of silica the plant absorbs from the soil. The Romans used it clean their pots and pans, an additional benefit being that the silica in Horsetail rendered them non-stick. Apart from scouring metal and wood it was used to treat amnesia, revitalise hair and strengthen weak fingernails.



Dandelion
Taraxacum officinale
Caisearbhán



Dandelion's name is a corruption of the French name for the plant "*Dents de Lion*" (lion's teeth) referring to the serrated nature of the leaves. The plant is rich in protein, sugar, vitamins and minerals. In herbal medicine it is a "bitter" meaning that it's bitter taste stimulates and strengthens the digestive system. The leaves were eaten in spring as a cleansing tonic. Their diuretic properties gave rise to the country name of "*piss-a-beds*" in French "*piss-en-lit*". Unlike conventional diuretics dandelion does not leech potassium from the body. The young leaves are highly nutritious added to salads and the roots were roasted to make a coffee substitute. It was believed to be beneficial for rheumatism, arthritis, gout, kidney and bladder problems, liver complaints and eczema. The white sap from the stems was believed to treat warts, it was applied daily to the wart until it was gone.



Self-Heal
Prunella vulgaris
Duán ceannchosach

Self-heal is a member of the mint family. It is edible and can be used in salads, soups and stews. It is rich in vitamins A, C and K along with flavonoids and rutin which helps the body produce collagen and absorb vitamin C. Rutin is believed to be beneficial to the heart, coincidentally herbalists of old used self-heal to treat heart problems. It was also used to staunch external and internal bleeding, it was employed in treating fevers, respiratory complaints, cold sores, mouth ulcers and sore throats. Irish herbalists used it as a posset, infusing the herb in cream, bringing it to the boil, straining it and allowing it to set. It is a valuable source of nectar for bees.



Common Knapweed
Centaurea nigra
Minscoth

Knapweed gets its name from the old Norse word “*knappr*” meaning a bud or knob. It was known as “*Matte Felon*” for its reputed ability to cure “*felons*” i.e. whitlows. It was used in a salve for treating wounds and bruises. It is both a diuretic (increases the amount of fluid and toxins expelled by the body) and a diaphoretic (induces sweating). It was also used to treat catarrh, sore throats, swelling of the jaws and to stop bleeding of the mouth and nose. It is beneficial to bees and other insects.



Germander Speedwell
Veronica chamaedrys
Lus cré talún

Speedwell was along with Vervain, St John's Wort, Eyebright, Mallow, Yarrow and Self-heal considered one of the seven invincible herbs (nothing natural or unnatural could injure them) by the ancient Irish. To have their full protective power it was believed that they had to be picked at noon on a bright day, close to a full moon. Speedwell was used in teas, tinctures, salves and poultices. It was believed to treat wounds, skin complaints, scurvy, smallpox, measles, colds and flu.



Red Clover
Trifolium pratense
Seamair dhearg



White Clover
Trifolium repens
Seamair bhán

Clovers are a legume and part of the same family as peas. Red Clover was used in conjunction with sloes as a remedy for fever and indigestion in children, it was also believed to treat osteoporosis, arthritis, skin and hair conditions. Both red and white varieties are “alterative” meaning they improve the condition of the blood. The leaves of red clover were used to treat bee stings and white clover was used to treat coughs. White clover is believed to be beneficial to the lymphatic system, to treat gout and kidney conditions. White clover has more nectar than

red but both are important sources of nectar for bees. Clover honey is now very sought after. Clovers are also vital in farmland as they are nitrogen fixers they have rhizobia bacteria on their roots with which they form a symbiotic relationship. These nodules of bacteria absorb and store nitrogen from the air, this is gradually released into the soil as parts of the plants wither and re-grow. Clover can fix 50 – 200kg nitrogen per hectare per year, reducing the dependence on chemical fertilisers.



Rosebay Willowherb
Chamaenerion angustifolium
Lus na tine

Rosebay Willowherb is also known as “**Fireweed**” as it colonises ground after fires, it is frequently seen in ground where gorse/furze or heather has been burnt off. The seeds can lie dormant deep in the ground for many years. A single plant can produce 80,000 seeds. A tiny bit of root can also lie dormant and grow after many years. Rosebay Willowherb has ninety times more vitamin A and four times more vitamin C than oranges. It was used for skin complaints, whooping cough in children and asthma. It is very rich in nectar making highly important for bees and biodiversity. Indigenous peoples in Alaska and Siberia ate the pith raw, cooked or fermented. In Russia “*Koporye tea*” is made from rosebay willowherb.



Blackberry
Rubus fruticosus
Dris

Blackberry briars are everywhere, the flowers are a source of nectar in the summer and the berries a source of food for birds and larger insects going into the autumn months. They are a source of vitamin C, K and copper. Blackberries were collected and made into jams, jellies, cordials and pies. Blackberry wine and blackberry vinegar were other popular preserving methods. They weren't collected after September 29th as the folk belief was that after that the puca spat on them, however silly this seemed there was a good reason for it. A larvae hatches in the berries at this particular time of year and the story of the puca was designed to stop children eating blackberries after this point. The leaves, root and berries were all used in herbal medicine, they were believed to support brain and digestive health and boost immunity. It was used to treat scalds, burns, boils and shingles. The roots were used to make the cores for sliothars (the balls used for hurling). The roots also yielded an orange dye. Under Brehon Law it was classed as one of the "bushes of the woods" and you could be fined for damaging it.



Ribwort Plantain
Plantago lanceolata
Slánlus

Greater Plantain
Plantago major
Chuach Phádraig



Ribwort Plantain was used to treat a fresh cut, it was chewed and applied to staunch bleeding, prevent blood poisoning and promote healing. Both types were used in the same fashion to soothe insect stings or bites. Plantains were believed to be useful in easing coughs and bronchitis, soothing burns and dermatitis and in a poultice for healing wounds.



Rough Hawkbit
Leontodon hispidus
Crág phortáin gharbh

Hawkbit has been used for kidney complaints and to treat jaundice and dropsy (fluid retention). It is an excellent plant for pollinators.



Hedge Bindweed
Calystegia sepium
Ialus fail

Bindweed is the bane of gardeners; if it gets into a garden it is next to impossible to eradicate. Its habit of climbing through any growth it encounters and binding to it, suffocates other plants. It is also known as “Devil’s garters”. The smallest part of a root will grow hence the difficulty in eradicating it. It was used as a remedy for kidney complaints in some places. As a nectar source hedge bindweed attracts butterflies, bees and hoverflies. Because the flowers are open at night it is a nectar source for night flying moths.



Marsh Cinquefoil
Comarum palustre
Cnó léana

Marsh Cinquefoil as the name suggest grows in peaty marsh land. The name cinquefoil comes from the French meaning “five leaves,” as many of this species have leaves divided into five leaflets. It is a good source of nectar for bees and flies. The root is astringent and was used in the treatment of dysentery and stomach cramps. It was used to treat inflammation of the mouth and bleeding gums.



Creeping Buttercup
Ranunculus repens
Fearbán

Buttercup was used in a poultice to treat muscular aches and pains; *caution was and is advised as the plant is toxic and causes blistering to the skin.* The Irish name “Fearbán” comes from “fearb” meaning a weal or welt; the sap from the leaves causes an allergic reaction leading to weal’s or blistering of the skin. Children played a game holding a buttercup under the chin. If the yellow reflected on the skin it meant you liked butter. This reflection comes about because of the unique structure of the petals.



Ragwort
Jacobaea vulgaris
Buachalán Bui

Ragwort was also known by the names Ragweed, Staggerwort, Stammerwort and Cankerwort among others. The juice of the plant was used to wash burns and inflammations of the eye and treat cancerous ulcers hence the old name Cankerwort. A poultice of the green leaves was used to treat the pain and swelling associated with rheumatism, sciatica and gout. It was believed to take away the pain of a bee sting. *It was always used with extreme caution as it has the potential to be toxic to humans. Ragwort is also highly toxic for cattle and horses; it contains alkaloids that cause liver damage.* There is no cure for Ragwort poisoning, the plants should be pulled and removed from the field. The older generation believed that it became sweet on being pulled and cattle were more likely to eat it. Folk beliefs in Ireland associated ragwort with the fairy folk, believing that they used it like a horse to ride around the countryside at night. Other beliefs were that if you struck a cow with a bunch of ragwort the fairies would steal her milk. Folklore held that the favourite place for a leprechaun to mend shoes was atop a ragwort on a summer morning.



Tufted Vetch
Vicia cracca
Peasair na luch

Tufted Vetch appears on the ditches as you approach the bog walk, it is a valuable source of nectar for pollinators and can be used as a “green manure” i.e. a plant/crop that is grown then ploughed back into the soil to enrich it. Tufted Vetch is a member of the legume family and fixes nitrogen into the soil. It was used as animal fodder. There is also some evidence to suggest that the seeds were used by people as a food source in ancient times.



Common Daisy
Bellis perennis
Nóinín

The **Common Daisy**, once called **Bruisewort**, was used to ease aches, pains and bruises in much the same way as we use arnica or arnica gel today. (Arnica is an alpine daisy) It was made into a salve to rub on aching joints or the leaves were bruised and rubbed directly on the joints. As a result it had the name “the gardeners’ friend”. The salve was also used to treat scrapes and cuts. Daisy flowers were also used to make an herbal infusion/tea which was believed to treat coughs, colds and catarrh. Studies in recent years show that common daisies contain as much vitamin C as lemons. It was also used to treat liver inflammation. The name Daisy is a corruption of the old English name “Day’s Eye”.



Ox-eye Daisy
Leucanthemum vulgare
Nóinín Mór

Ox-eye Daisy was used like its smaller relative to treat respiratory tract conditions such as coughs and catarrh, it was considered a wound herb in that it promoted the healing of wounds and again the bruised leaves were applied to reduce swelling. It was made into teas and salves. A distilled water made from the flowers was used to treat conjunctivitis.



Silverweed
Potentilla anserina
Briosclán

Silverweed gets its name from the silver colour on the underside of the plant's green leaves. The leaves were once used as insoles in the shoes to soothe aching feet. When the plant is fresh it is said to be slightly radioactive thus having an analgesic effect on a painful area. It was used as food for geese, the name "anserina" comes from the Latin word "anser" meaning goose. People living on some of the Scottish islands cultivated the roots until potatoes were introduced. The roots were also dried, ground and made into a type of flour for bread making. It was used to make a gargle for sore throats and on the continent it was boiled in milk to treat tetanus or lockjaw.



Grass of Parnassus
Parnassia palustris
Fionnscoth

Tiny white **Grass of Parnassus** also known as "Bog Star" is one of the most beautiful native plants, growing on the margins of bogland and fens. It flowers from July – September. Its Swedish name is "Slätterbloma" (*hay-making flower*) as its appearance signified to farmers that it was harvest time. It is misleadingly named as it isn't a grass but a flowering plant, it was named "*Parnassia palustris*" by Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus after Mt. Parnassus in Greece, *palustris* is a Latin word meaning marshy ground. Its Gaelic name is "Fionnscoth" (*fair flower or blossom*). It was used by ancient herbalists as an ingredient in mouthwash, eye lotion and as a treatment for indigestion.



Ragged Robin
Silene flos cuculi
Lus Síoda

Ragged Robin flowers in early summer, its leaves are modified to help it survive windy conditions, thus its characteristic ragged appearance. It is a favourite of butterflies, especially the Common Blue, and a valuable source of nectar for long tongued bees. This flower was believed to have magical powers and was a symbol of knowledge, truth and honour. The ancient Gaels believed if you drank or bathed in water into which this flower had been placed, it would increase your knowledge and make you eloquent in both word and deed.



Field Scabious (Red Admiral Butterfly)
Knautia arvensis
Cab an Ghasáin

Scabious was used to treat scabies (hence the name) ulcers, boils, weeping sores and wounds as well as coughs and lung complaints. It is good nectar source for pollinators especially for butterflies, moths and bees.



Lady's Smock or
Cuckoo Flower
Cardamine pratensis
Biolar Gréagháin

Lady's Smock is so called because it was said to resemble a milkmaid's smock, the name Cuckoo Flower comes from the fact that it usually blooms in April and May when the cuckoo can be heard. It is also known as "*Meadow Cress*" in places and the leaves were added to salads, its flavour said to resemble watercress. It comes from the same family of plants as mustard. To herbalists in past times Lady's Smock/Cuckoo Flower was a remedy for scurvy and fevers due to its high vitamin C content. It was made into a tea to relieve coughs and ease abdominal cramps. It was also prescribed for kidney stones, and ulcers, to aid digestion or stimulate the appetite, as a diuretic and to ease the pain of arthritis and rheumatism. It is the favourite food for the larvae/caterpillars of the Orange Tip and Green Veined White Butterflies. One old superstition suggested that picking it would cause a thunder storm.



Lesser Stitchwort
Stellaria graminea
Tursarraing Chorraigh

Stitchwort is so called as it was once used as a remedy for "stitch" the pain you get in your side while exercising. It is a perennial creeping plant with tiny white star shaped flowers. It is normally found on acidic to neutral soils.



Broad - leaved Dock
Rumex obtusifolius
Copóg

Docks were commonly used to soothe nettle stings (who hasn't rubbed a dock leaf on a nettle sting) insect bites, scalds, blisters and sprains. They were used to staunch bleeding and believed to purify the blood. The juice of the plant was applied as a compress to heal bruises. The seeds were used to treat coughs, colds and bronchitis while the roots were used to treat jaundice, liver problems, skin ailments, boils and rheumatism. The leaves were used to wrap homemade butter. The seed heads provide winter food for birds, rodents and deer, helping with biodiversity. Young dock leaves have a tart lemony taste and can be used like spinach, served with butter and bacon. Dried leaves can be used as seasoning for rice, potatoes and seafood. Curled dock has more vitamin C than oranges, more vitamin A than carrots plus being a source of vitamins B1, B2 and iron. **Docks contain oxalic acid which is toxic if used in high amounts. They can also trigger hay fever or aggravate asthma.**



Hart's Tongue Fern
Asplenium
Creamh na Muice Fia

Hart's Tongue Fern is so named because the leaves resemble a hart's tongue; a hart is an adult male red deer over 5 years of age. "Creamh na Muice Fia" translates as wild pigs garlic. Other Irish names for the plant "Teanga Fia" i.e. Deer's Tongue and in Donegal it's also known as "Cow's Tongue" and "Foxes Tongue". The botanical/Latin name "scolopendrium" means centipede and refers to the arrangement of the spore producing sporangia on the underside of the leaves which are said to resemble a centipede's legs. Ferns produce neither flowers nor seeds; all ferns reproduce by releasing spores. Hart's Tongue Fern was used treating ailments of the spleen, liver and stomach. It was used in treating the highly contagious "bloody flux" i.e. dysentery. The leaves were roasted and used to treat burns; to treat scalds a leaf or leaves were applied, underside uppermost, to the scald. It was also used in the treatment of coughs, hiccups and bleeding gums. There is evidence that it was used in brewing and reference in the "Leabhar Gabhála" (The Book of Invasions) of Malaliach (credited as the first brewer in Ireland) making "Lind Ratha" otherwise known as fern ale.



Ivy/Atlantic
Hedera Hibernia
Eidhneán

Ivy is an evergreen plant which climbs, by means of tiny tendrils, up tree trunks, walls and any surface it can cling to. In woodland areas it will also carpet the ground. Contrary to popular opinion it is not parasitic, killing trees for nourishment. However its weight can eventually cause trees to topple. On historic buildings and ruins it can loosen masonry which inevitably leads to structure collapse. Ivy should be removed from protected structures under expert supervision. Ivy flowers from September to November with purple berries appearing in the following Spring. The berries are toxic if eaten. Ivy flowers provide food for the Holly Blue butterfly and the leaves for its larvae. The Brimstone butterfly finds shelter under its leaves during winter. It is paired with Holly at Christmas; both are traditionally used in making wreaths and garlands. Ivy leaf extract was used to treat chesty coughs, it worked as an expectorant to loosen phlegm. Nowadays it is recommended for external use only as it has the potential to be toxic in large doses. Ivy honey has a strong taste which bears some resemblance to that of eucalyptus and again is believed to be effective against chesty coughs and blocked sinuses.



Holly
Ilex Aquifolium
Cuileann

Holly leaves, like those of Ivy, are a food source for the larvae of the Holly Blue butterfly. The wood is white with an even grain. It was used to make spear shafts and chariot axles by the ancient Gaels. Highly prized by cabinet makers; it is hard, compact and takes a good polish, and used for inlay work, especially as it can be stained black, red or green. Its bright leaves and red berries symbolised life in the bleak of Winter. Holly was used to treat coughs, bronchitis, fevers and rheumatism, it is not used as such nowadays as it can cause severe vomiting if taken in excess. It was grown near houses or hung over doors to protect against evil spirits and lightning strikes.



Furze/Gorse
Ulex europaeus
Aiteann

The names “**Furze**” and “**Gorse**” come from Old English “fyr” (fire) and “gorst” (a thorny shrub) the Gaelic name “**Aiteann**” means “sharp” a reference to its spiky thorns. In ancient Ireland furze was designated as one of the bushes of the wood under Brehon Laws. It was used in the Bealtaine bonfires which the cattle were herded between for protection and fertility before being brought to the summer pastures, also the smoke from the fires killed or helped repel fleas and ticks. Furze has a high concentration of oil in its leaves and timber. It catches fire easily and burns at a high heat, at one point it was much in demand as fuel for bakers ovens, including those of Irish monasteries, the ashes from burned furze are alkaline and were used on the land as a fertiliser. Furze was used as a fodder plant for animals, it contains half the protein of oats, the older generation said that an acre of furze could feed six horses for the winter. While horses and goats will strip the bushes; the usual way of dealing with them was to run the branches through a stone mill or to beat them with mallets rendering the spines down to a moss like texture. This made it more appealing to cows and sheep. In 2021 a herd of native goats were introduced on the Hill of Howth to help control the furze and prevent wildfires in the summer. The bark and flowers made a yellow dye similar in colour to saffron. The flowers were added to both mead and whiskey for flavour and colour. It was also used for roofing, cleaning chimneys, tool handles and longer branches made walking sticks and hurleys. A “spealóg” was a hurley made from furze wood. A sprig was added to bridal bouquets in the hopes that the couple would be blessed with children. The flowers were scattered around the entrances to the house and buildings on May eve to keep out spirits and other unwelcome visitors. A circle was walked around farm animals while carrying a furze branch dipped in salted water to protect them from harm. Furze is a rich source of nectar for bees.



Hawthorn/Whitethorn
Crataegus monogyna
Sceach Geal



Hawthorn can be described as a bush or small tree which has spiky sharp thorns. It has always been valued as a hedging plant; indeed the word “haw” is an old word for hedge. It produces masses of scented white flowers in spring and is laden down with red berries in autumn. A source of nectar for pollinators and a food source for birds in winter. The timber is exceptionally strong and hard. It has a fine grain and polishes beautifully it was used to make small household articles including tool handles, boxes and combs. It makes an exceptional fuel and was considered excellent for oven heating. Charcoal made from it was said to melt pig iron without the aid of a blast. The berries were made into haw jelly or wine, the young leaves were eaten and referred to as “bread and cheese” due to the taste. It was used in herbal medicine to treat heart complaints. It possesses antioxidants which help repair and prevent tissue damage. In Ireland hawthorn was associated with the fairies and is treated with great respect. To this day a lone thorn bush is never cut down. The flowers were never brought into the house; again for fear of offending the fairies. Hawthorns were believed to have protective properties and if one grew near a house you were safe from storms and lightning. At dawn on Bealtine (May 1st) both men and women would bathe in the dew from the hawthorn blossom to bring health, wealth and good luck. Women would bathe their faces to increase their beauty and men their hands to become more skilled craftsmen or workers.