



Writtle COLLEGE

a partner institution of the University of Essex

CHELSEA FLOWER SHOW EXHIBIT 2004

Tell Tale Plants



*He who knows what sweets and virtues
are in the ground, the plants, the waters,
the heavens, and how to come at these
enchantments - is the rich and royal man.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson





Tell Tale Plant ?

Every plant has a story. Each has a role to play in nature and indeed in the lives of humans. The fact that you have decided to visit the world's most famous flower show today bears testament to this as you join with literally thousands of others in paying homage to plants just because they are what they are. Plants have long been a source of wonder and amazement for humans and have of course featured in, or been the object of, countless stories.

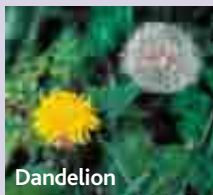
In times past, changes in the plants surrounding helped us to mark the change of the seasons whilst the appearance of others marks the commencement of

seasonal harvest and feast days. It is easy to think of plant stories as remnants of a historical tradition, indicative of times past when more 'primitive' cultures communed with nature. Yet there is a living culture of plant stories and tales all around us.

The pressures of modern living make many of us more remote from nature than we might like, yet plants continue to affect almost every aspect of the way that we live today. Stories about plants live on - even from ancient origins – for this very reason.

The aim of this exhibit is to draw attention to this rich cultural heritage of plant names and stories. Far from being an aspect

of a bygone age, these stories represent a rich living history, which, although its origins lie in the past, owes much to modern living and modern day culture. Plants are a vibrant and colourful reminder that we are the product of thousands of years of human culture. Plant stories persist and possess a currency not easily rivalled by written words. These tales can help to educate people of the importance of plants in all our lives and act as a priceless storehouse of traditional knowledge in plant uses in every place where humans live side-by-side with plants. Protecting this heritage is just as important as protecting the plants themselves.



Dandelion

Suburbia is where the developer bulldozes out the trees, then names the streets after them."

Bill Vaughn

What's in a Name?

Plants have always formed an important resource for humankind. Whenever people moved to new lands they often took familiar plants with them in order to ensure that they would have these close at hand. Knowing which plant was which was of the utmost importance.

To the untrained eye, different plant species have similarities such as leaf shapes or flower colour. Close observation is often needed to truly identify whether it is one type of plant or another.

We tend to think that, as modern day humans, we are somehow highly advanced and that our scientific approach to plant classification is also more highly advanced than traditional approaches. In times past however, people were arguably far more in tune with the plants around them than in the modern day. These plants were often valued for their properties and knowing which was which, could mean the difference between choosing a useful herb or a poisonous one!

Plant knowledge was handed down over the generations and the names given reflected the use of the plant by

the local population. In exactly the same way that languages diverged over time, so did these traditional folk classifications and the same plant became known by many names across its natural range. Plant names could be described as a sort of shorthand for the accumulated folk wisdom relating to the surrounding plant life. It was much easier to remember a plant based on what it was used for and this in itself served to foster knowledge of these uses.

Plant names also help us to gain insight into the culture of the time and the way that those communities viewed their world. Names often persist into modern times that may reflect linguistic and cultural aspects of former cultures. Anything with 'wort' at the end – Woundwort for instance – was of Saxon origin (in the UK) and comes from an old Gothic term meaning root.

Its presence denotes that they were once used to cure diseases. These historic 'fragments of knowledge' are just as precious as fragments of parchment or buried treasures from the same period. They are a living link to our ancestors and the cultures that helped shape who we are today.

*Spring has arrived
when you can set
your foot on 7
daisies at once.*

traditional saying



Daisies





Writtle College

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Traditional Plant Use

Plant knowledge enabled our forbears to use their immediate natural surroundings as a larder, medicine cabinet, and tool shed. Everyday existence dictated that people became both familiar and skilled in the use of plants. This is not to say that everyone had an eclectic mix of skills distributed evenly among the population. Specialist uses were carried out by people skilled in the use of plants for that purpose. Despite this, many plants had simple day to day uses. Often it is this fundamental 'common knowledge' which is most easily lost and stories and rhymes about plants - as well as vernacular (common) names - help preserve this knowledge, even though the use of the plant for that purpose may have ceased.

Myth and Legend

Of course not every story about plants is based purely upon truth. Often they represent a view of the world that was limited by the experiences of the local population. One of the strangest 'Botanical Myths' for instance is that of the Barnacle Tree. This mythic plant was (it was claimed) covered in large barnacles that opened to reveal geese! This legend owes its origins to great antiquity, possibly because people were unable to explain the appearance and disappearance of migratory geese on a seasonal basis.

The tale of the Barnacle Tree is recorded as being denounced by Albert Magnus in the 13th Century, yet tales of the tree remained popular until the 18th Century. The herbalist William Turner accepted the idea, as did John Gerard in his *Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes* that he published in 1597. In the latter, Gerard describes in detail the tree's location, life cycle and even the bird it produced!



Strange you may think, but such stories abounded and probably persisted as much for their sensational and entertainment value as any realistic belief in their existence. Perhaps if you had never seen a Venus fly trap eat a fly, or seen giant redwoods reaching toward the sky, you may have thought these 'familiar' things fantastical beyond belief.

It is also worth remembering that there were no psychiatrists counselling people on how to give up fantasies in favour of the 'real world.' It is probably just as well - the minds of people a thousand years ago was packed full of the sorts of figures and images that have been the stock-in-trade of fantasy writers ever since. Such legends then shed insight into the workings of the human mind and are ultimately as entertaining now as they ever were!

"The unlimited capacity of the plant world to sustain man at his highest is a region as yet unexplored by modern science."

Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948), quoted in Anthony Huxley, *Plants and Planet*, 1975



Folklore

Folklore is probably best regarded as a general term for the verbal, spiritual, and material aspects of any culture. Folklore is communicated orally, by observation, or by imitation as tradition. People sharing a culture may share an occupation, language, ethnicity, age, or geographical location and through this, traditions are preserved and passed on from generation to generation. Despite this, folklore is constantly modified and shaped by memory, immediate need or purpose, and especially through the 'telling' of the story. The word folklore was coined in 1846 by the English antiquary William John Thoms, in order to replace the rather unhelpful term 'popular antiquities.'

Folk tradition and modern 'popular tradition' do intermingle and indeed, popular forms continually draw on 'genuine' folklore forms for inspiration. Rather than dying out, folklore is probably still part of the learning of many groups, from family units to nations themselves.

Thankfully the former tendency of some academics to look upon folklore either as quaint, romantic or as somehow inferior has largely disappeared. Folklore has come to be regarded as part of the human learning process and an important source of information about the history of human life.

Plant Lore

Plant lore, as the name suggests, is the body of tradition relating to plants. It is as rich and diverse as folklore itself and acts as a vital repository of information relating to the indigenous uses of plants. It owes much - although ancient in origin - to the interest of the Victorian writers that were interested in folklore. Plant lore - in common with folklore - is constantly changing and preserves many elements from antiquity whilst blending this with the experiences of the modern day.

Garden Lore

Garden lore is mainly about the collective experiences and knowledge of gardeners. It has much in common with plant lore but of course looks at more than just individual plants and will regard all elements of the garden including the soil, climate and the animals that reside therein. Some of it is pure wisdom and some just tall tales, and the garden is of course a great place to relax and think up new tales! Most of you here today at the show will have a remarkable store of garden lore close at hand and all around you!



Foxglove

*“Oak before Ash
and we're in for a
splash, Ash before
Oak and we're in
for a soak.”*

**Traditional - which leaves
emerge first and the coming
summer's weather.**



Yew

A Living Cultural Heritage in Plants

When you hear a story about a plant or encounter an unusual local name for a plant you have entered a world of living history. Humankind, whether we like to admit it or not, is intimately associated with and totally reliant upon plants. With so many of us separated from our 'historical rural origins,' we run the risk of losing touch with just how much we depend upon plants. Increasing urbanisation and the proliferation of processed foods, purveyed in hygienically sanitised conditions all serve to remove the link from popular consciousness.

Small wonder then that environmentalists seek increasingly to teach people of the importance of plants. Folklore can play a vital and important role here. Stories are what people generally want to hear. The traditional scientific approach – for all its rigour and exactness – does not always grab the attention. Researchers can run the risk of forgetting that the telling of the story is even more important than the story itself. By that reckoning, really important stories or issues deserve superlative storytelling skills!

Fortunately the art of storytelling is as old as humanity itself and all of us have at least one or two good stories to tell. This is where the nub of all of this lies.

Writing the stories down may be important but cannot always convey the skill of the teller. In order for this knowledge to remain alive, it must be told and retold, often and down the generations. It is a part of our heritage and exists because it was once – and is still - important.

Plant stories were once told because they helped our survival within an often hostile environment. Now in the 21st Century, the environment is itself threatened by a people rapidly removed from ancient roots. The very tales that we once used to help us survive may yet find a different use in protecting the environment itself. What a tale these plants have to tell!



Cuckoo Pint



Stitchwort



Ground Ivy

*None can have
a healthy love for
flowers unless he
loves the wild ones*

Forbes Watson



A Global Concern



I would feel more optimistic about a bright future for man if he spent less time proving that he can outwit Nature and more time tasting her sweetness and respecting her seniority.

Elwyn Brooks White, Essays of E.B. White, 1977

The current interest in preserving both traditional knowledge about plants and the systems that have been involved in classifying such knowledge, is unprecedented. This is true not just in the UK but is even more pronounced in a global context. The interest is further enhanced by the growing popularity of this area in terms of multi-national funding of projects. Without a doubt, plant folklore is rapidly becoming big business and with this its profile has grown steadily.

This increased prominence can be traced to a number of developments, perhaps the most important of which is the growing global perception of the need to respond adequately to environmental risks and issues. Many now believe that linking of indigenous knowledge to conservation concerns is of vital

importance if conservation is ever to be embraced and succeed at a local level. It is arguably a democratisation of the responsibility for environmental stewardship. The people closest to the problem may well have the solution at hand – quite unlike centralised governance that may prefer to rationalize and simplify policy.

Seeking local solutions to problems also engenders ownership, not only of the problem but also of the solution. Increasingly, fragile habitats such as tropical rainforests are hailed as a possible repository of medical cures. Without the accumulated knowledge of thousands of years of human interaction - by indigenous peoples - with this environment, however, much of this potential will remain locked away and hidden from our remote view. If the local population have the solution to our

problems then they should own it and should benefit from it. This is just the incentive that many peoples need to help value and aid in the preservation of their natural resources. Far from being an archaic relic of 'bygone and outmoded cultures,' the folklore and knowledge of plants may yet be the key to unlocking another chapter of humankind's future.

Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.

Martin Luther (1483-1546)