

## May Blossom

As I sit and write this I am awaiting the most impressive annual event occurring in our garden. The third week in May is about the usual time and it is imminent! I am referring to the flowering of the very large hawthorn tree in our back garden. It is a lovely gnarled multi-stem tree with a canopy measuring 8 metres across. (In the aerial photo taken of our house in 1973 it is a fairly conventional bush measuring about 8 feet across.) The blossom on this tree can be very dense so that you cannot see the leaves and twigs, though some years are better than others and sometimes the flowers are damaged by cold winds. It does, of course, have quite an odd smell which many people find unpleasant but the bees, flies and hoverflies certainly don't!



The young leaves, flower buds and petals are edible and are referred to as “bread and cheese” – they can be used in salads. I think we may have got this wrong when we were kids – we used to call it “bread and cheese” but we ate the berries sandwiched between leaves and it was pretty horrible!

Its blossoming marks the point at which spring turns into summer, and the old saying ‘Cast ne’er a clout ere May is out’ almost certainly refers to the opening of hawthorn flowers rather than the end of the month.

Common hawthorn timber is a creamy-brown colour, finely grained and very hard. It can be used in turnery and engraving and to make veneers and cabinets, as well as boxes, tool handles and boat parts. It also makes good firewood and burns at high temperatures.

A hawthorn tree can support hundreds of other species. It is the foodplant for many caterpillars of moths. Its flowers are eaten by dormice and provide nectar and pollen for bees and other pollinating insects. The haws are rich in antioxidants and are eaten by migrating birds, such as redwings, fieldfares and thrushes, as well as small mammals. And the dense, thorny foliage makes fantastic nesting shelter for many species of bird.

May blossom has a long history of traditions and stories attached to it. Hawthorn is a pagan symbol of fertility and has ancient associations with May Day. It was the ancestor of the Maypole and its leaves and flowers the source of May Day garlands as well as appearing in the wreath of the Green Man.

Hawthorn was never brought into the home. It was believed that bringing hawthorn blossom inside would be followed by illness and death, and in medieval times it was said that hawthorn blossom smelled like the Great Plague. Botanists later learned that the chemical trimethylamine in hawthorn blossom is also one of the first chemicals formed in decaying animal tissue, so it is not surprising that hawthorn flowers are associated with death.

So despite this, it is a splendid plant and one to be cherished. I only wish there was more of it around here. Our local hedges are mostly blackthorn unlike further east in the UK. I shall never forget taking off from Gatwick in mid-May one year and being awestruck by the criss-crossing white hedgerows beneath.

*Rosemary Royle*