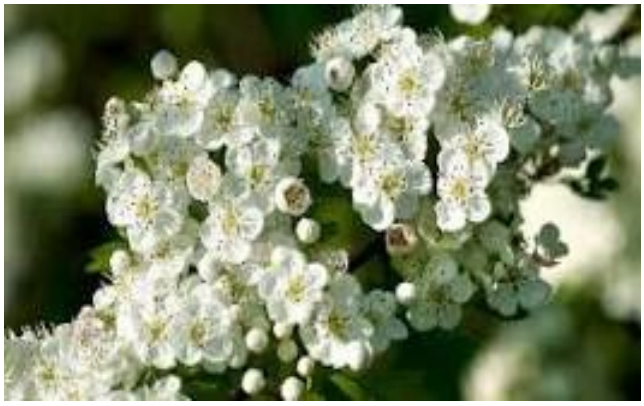
PLANT FACTS: HAWTHORN

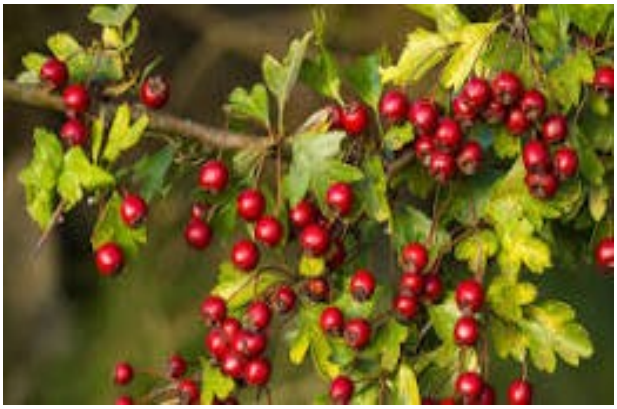
A plant commonly associated with the month of May is the Hawthorn, also known as the May tree or May blossom. It is named after the month in which it traditionally blooms in Britain.



Hawthorn (Crataegus monogyna) is a robust tree that can grow up to 15 meters tall. It is found in woodland and scrub and is often used as a hedgerow plant. It will grow in most soils but flowers and fruits best in full sun. The hawthorn is characterised by its dense, thorny habit although it can grow as a small tree with a single stem. The bark is brown-grey, knotted and fissured and the twigs are slender and brown, covered in thorns. While traditionally blooming in May, climate change is causing hawthorn to flower earlier, with some records indicating flowering as early as the end of March.

Hawthorns are hermaphrodite, meaning both male and female reproductive parts are contained within each flower. Flowers are highly scented, white or occasionally pink with five petals, and grow in flat-topped clusters.

Once pollinated by insects, they develop into deep-red fruits known as 'haws'.



Hawthorn can support hundreds of other species. It is the foodplant for the caterpillars of many moths, whilst 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.

The dense, thorny foliage makes fantastic nesting shelter for many species of bird.

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.

Its blossoming marks the point at which spring turns into summer, and the old saying ‘Cast ne’er a clout ‘till 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 charcoal and has a reputation for burning at high temperatures.

The young leaves, flower buds and young flowers are all edible. They can be added to green salads. The haws can be eaten raw but may cause mild

stomach upset. They are most commonly used to make jellies, wines and ketchups.

Hawthorn has long been grown as a hedging plant and is a popular choice in wildlife gardens. It is pretty tough but can be prone to aphid attack, gall mites and the bacterial disease called fireblight.

PLANT FACTS: QUINCE

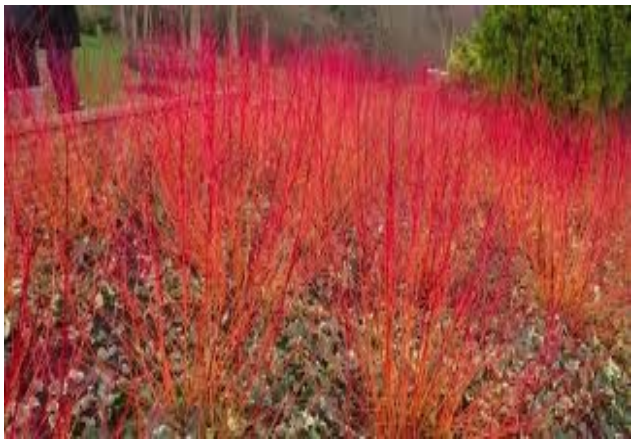
If you have spotted a knobbly, apple shaped fruit on a tree in the last few months, it may well have been a quince. It is a fragrant relative of the pear, with golden yellow skin which develops an orange blush when ripe. The quince is almost impossible to eat raw as it is rock hard and bitter, but once cooked it has a mellow citrus, honey flavour. It is rich in antioxidants, potassium, iron, vitamin C and fibre, so a useful fruit.

It is also very versatile and can be used in sweet or savoury cooking. Quince paste or chutney is often found on an upmarket cheese board. The high levels of pectin in the fruit means that it sets nicely when heated with sugar, hence its use in chutneys, jams and marmalades. In Spain it is used in Membrillo, which is a solid preserve made from simmered, sweetened quince puree that has been allowed to set. If stewed slowly with sugar and lemon it can be added to apple pie, bread and butter pudding porridge or custard – also very nice if poached in white wine!

It is tasty when braised with lamb in a casserole or roasted alongside duck or pork.

And finally, if you use quince instead of sloe berries you can make quince gin or quince vodka. So, keep your eyes open for quince!

PLANT FACTS: DOGWOOD



Hidden for much of the year by green leaves, once they fall in the autumn, the stems of the dogwood shrubs (Cornus) reveal their colour and bring a flash of warmth to the winter garden all the way through to spring when the leaves reappear. The shrub is a rounded shrub with green or variegated leaves and inconspicuous flowers. But the stems are their standout feature and are enhanced where a number are planted together.

Not all dogwoods produce red stems – you can find varieties with bright green, yellow, purple or orange stems. “Midwinter Fire” (next page) is a variety with multi-coloured stems that glow red, yellow and orange. “Sibirica” (above) has vivid red stems. “Kesselringil” (next page) has dramatic black-purple bark.

Dogwoods are easy to grow and don’t mind waterlogged soil although they prefer a sunny spot. Once the plant is established, cut all the stems right down to around 15cm in March (known as coppicing) as it is the new shoots that are the most vibrant and these will shoot up through the summer ready for the following autumn and winter.

PLANT FACTS: DANDELIONS

We all know a dandelion when we see it – oblong leaves with jagged edges that grow directly from the crown of the plant at ground level. The yellow flowers grow on hollow stalks and produce white pompom-like seed heads often called “dandelion clocks”.

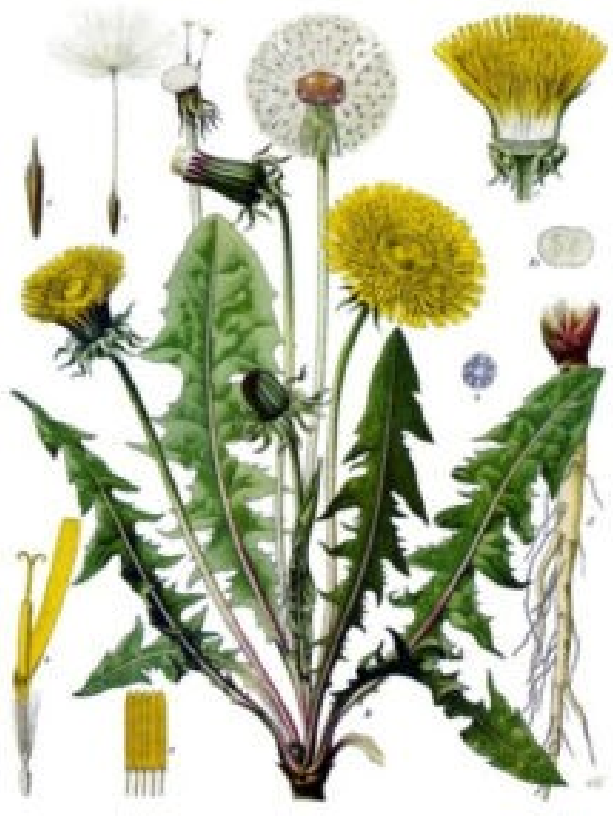
The name “dandelion” derives from the French *dent de lion* or “lion’s tooth” because of the leaf shape. In France the plant is known as *pissenlit* or “wet the bed” (a name I remember from my childhood) due to its diuretic qualities.

Anyone who had ever owned rabbits or guinea pigs will know that they adore dandelions. I used to collect handfuls as I walked back from taking the children to school to feed our guinea pigs. But they can also be eaten by humans or used to make tea. Flowers are available from March to October, roots in spring and autumn, and leaves all year round. They can be found everywhere, although best to pick from areas which are not frequented by dogs!

Dandelions are a very successful plant, easily recognised and can grow anywhere – they are masters of survival! Historically, dandelions were praised for the golden blossoms and as a provider of foods, medicine and magic. But somewhere in the twentieth century, we decided that the dandelion was a weed which needed to be eradicated.

Dandelions have deep roots in history; Ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans all enjoyed the flower and they have been used in Chinese traditional medicine for over a thousand years. They were even taken to North America on The Mayflower probably for their medicinal benefits.

The flower was recognised for its beauty, grown in gardens in Europe and celebrated in many poems. In Japan, whole horticultural societies formed to enjoy the beauty of dandelions and to develop exciting new varieties for gardeners.



Dandelions are a green and growing first aid kit; the use of dandelions in the healing arts goes so far back that it's impossible to trace its history. For thousands of years, people have used dandelion tonics to help the liver remove toxins from the bloodstream. Dandelions were prescribed for every aliment, from warts to the plague. Herbalists still hail the dandelion as the perfect plant medicine; it is a gentle diuretic that provides nutrients and helps the digestive system function at peak efficiency. Dandelions are more nutritious that most of the vegetables in our gardens and have been used to treat baldness, dandruff, toothache, sores, fevers, weakness and lethargy and depression. It was not until the 20th century that the underlying cause of many of these symptoms was identified as vitamin deficiency. The dandelion has more vitamin A than spinach, more vitamin C than tomatoes, provides vitamins B and K and is a powerhouse of iron, calcium and

potassium (this could explain why my guinea pigs were so healthy and lived for over 8 years).

Although we spend a lot of time trying to eradicate dandelions from our lawns, they are actually good for the soil; their wide spreading roots loosen hard packed soil, aerate the earth and help reduce erosion. The deep taproot pulls nutrients such as calcium deep in the soil and makes them available to other plants. They also act as a fertiliser for the grass!

Dandelions are survivors. They can root in places that seem short of miraculous and then are impossible to get rid of. They are so difficult to kill because they are fast growers. The yellow flowers go from bud to seed in days. Their lifespan is long too – an individual plant can live for years. The roots sink deeper over the years and can go down 15 feet. The roots clone when divided and a one-inch piece of dandelion root can grow a whole new dandelion. Dandelions can shove their leaves through gravel, cement and thrive in barren habitats.

Dandelions used for food are very extensive. Dried roots are sold as a caffeine-free coffee substitute. They are also used to make tea, and wine. You can enjoy a complete meal from salad greens to dandelion quiche, followed by dandelion ice cream or dandelion cake washed down with dandelion wine. If you over-indulge, a cup of dandelion tea is the perfect remedy to cure the hangover.

Dandelions require sun and disturbed soil to thrive. That's why they seem to "look for" human activities: roadsides, construction sites, car parks – and lawns and playing fields. Having escaped the herb gardens a few decades ago, they now seem to be on a mission to get back into the gardens they once abandoned. Dandelions probably will never be eradicated, but we can learn to be more at ease with dandelions and other wild things – and maybe even to love them a little.