

Celtic wisdom and the glory of wild flowers No 19: Meadowsweet – Filipendula ulmaria

Celebrated in many languages as “Queen of the Meadow” this sweetly-fragranced plant was a favourite of Queen Elizabeth I – “for the smell thereof maketh the heart merrie.”

More importantly, it has a long history as a medicinal plant which in the 1890s helped produce the first aspirin. At the time the plant was classified as a Spiraea from which the name aspirin derives.

Its sweet fragrance was used in *pot pourri*, was regularly employed as a “strewing herb” at weddings and was added to bridal garlands to promote love in medieval and Tudor times, earning the nickname bridewort.

Folklore decreed that the sweet scent had the power to grant second sight and an ability to “converse with the fairies”. But on the more sinister side, it was deemed unlucky to have in the house and often created a mess because its tiny petals dropped easily and created pollen dust which prompted another nickname – old man’s pepper.

Meadowsweet, one of the most sacred herbs of the Druids, has leaves which provide an excellent flavouring for soups as well as flowers which produce a tasty herbal tea.

Before hops arrived in Britain, it was also used to flavour beer and the dried flowers were smoked like tobacco or infused with claret to be used as perfume.

The versatile plant, blooming between June and September on riverbanks and in wet meadows, contains no nectar in its creamy white flowers but insects are attracted to an abundant sweet-scented pollen.

It is one of the 30 herbs and spices added to the popular Norfolk punch cordial drink, using a medieval recipe originally created by the local monks.

According to John Gerard, 16th century botanist: “The leaves and floures of meadowsweet farre excelle all other strowing herbs for to decke up houses, to strawe in chambers, halls and banqueting-houses in the summer-time, for the smell thereof makes the heart merrie and joyful and delighteth the senses.”

In Welsh mythology, the magicians Math and Gwydion created a beautiful maiden out of the flowers of the meadowsweet, broom and oka. She was named Bludeuwedd, meaning “flower faced” and was made for one purpose – to be a wife to the hero Lleu Llaw Gyffes. He had been put under a spell by his mother, Arianhod, that he would never have a human wife.

After they were married, Bludeuwedd took a lover and they conspired unsuccessfully to murder Lleu. As a punishment, she was transformed into an owl to be forever shunned in daylight hours.

And Gwydion said to Math, when it was Spring:

“Come now and let us make a wife for Llew.”

And so they broke broad boughs yet moist with dew,

And in a shadow made a magic ring:

They took the violet and the meadow-sweet

To form her pretty face, and for her feet

They built a mound of daisies on a wing,

And for her voice they made a linnet sing

In the wide poppy blowing for her mouth.

And over all they chanted twenty hours.

And Llew came singing from the azure south

And bore away his wife of birds and flowers.

---by Francis Ledwidge

Ends