

Contents

Preface 7
Introduction 9
Harvesting from the wayside 10
Using your wayside harvest 13

Alexanders 20	Lesser celandine 112
Ash 24	Mouse-ear hawkweed 116
Avens 28	Navelwort 120
Bistort 32	Ox-eye daisy 124
Black horehound 36	Pine 128
Blackthorn 40	Primrose & cowslip 134
Bugle 44	Purple loosestrife 139
Butcher's broom 48	Rowan 144
Chicory 50	Sanicle 148
Cranesbill 54	Scabious 152
Creeping jenny & yellow loosestrife 58	Sea buckthorn 157
Daisy 62	Silverweed, tormentil & cinquefoil 162
Fleabane 68	Sowthistle 166
Forget-me-not 72	Speedwell 170
Fumitory 76	Sphagnum moss 176
Goldenrod 80	Sweet chestnut 178
Greater celandine 84	Thistle 182
Ground elder 87	Valerian 187
Ground ivy 92	Violet 192
Gypsywort 96	Walnut 198
Heather & bell heather 99	Wild carrot 202
Herb robert 104	Wild strawberry 206
Hogweed 108	Woundwort 210

Notes to the text 214
Recommended reading 219
Resources 220
Index 221
The authors 224



Forget-me-not *Myosotis arvensis*

Boraginaceae **Borage family**

Description: Annual/perennial, typically less than 50cm (20in) tall; thin hairy stems; small, terminal flowers, of striking pale blue with yellow 'eye'; daisy-like spatulate leaves; prolific in spring and summer.

Habitat: Generally fields, woods, waysides, gardens.

Distribution: Native in Eurasia and New Zealand; naturalised in US, apart from south and southwest.

Related species: Water forget-me-not (*Myosotis scorpioides*, syn. *M. palustris*) retains the old allusion to scorpions in its name, and is found at pond edges and in damp fields; wood forget-me-not (*M. sylvatica*) prefers drier rock and woodland habitats; *M. arvensis* var. *sylvestris* is the larger-flowered garden variety. Half a dozen more species are known in Britain, and about a hundred worldwide.

Parts used: Flowering tops, stems and leaves.

German legends, a poet with a footnote and a steamy scene from DH Lawrence: forget-me-not is irresistible to writers! It may sound dull after all this that the plant's predominant medicinal use is a cough syrup and as a flower essence, but clinical research is now suggesting other prospects.

There is an old German legend in which God was naming all the flowers. One, a little blue flower, was overlooked. It called out, 'Forget-me-not', and God said that as all the names had gone, these very words were to be its name.

There was confusion about the plant for over 1500 years after Dioscorides (1st century AD) used the common name of 'mouse-ear' (*myosotis*), which also applied to

a type of hawkweed. John Gerard (1597) named three *Myosotis* species, but there was as yet no agreed common name.

It needed the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge to give the plant the name we know it by today. Coleridge was travelling in Germany in the early years of the 19th century. He knew the medieval German legend of a love-struck knight, who was



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Forget me not

Ground elder *Aegopodium podagraria*

'Love your weeds' is an invocation that might stretch patience and credulity in the case of ground elder. Yet a positive case can be made for this garden pestilence as a traditional gout and anti-inflammatory treatment, a forage food, and most intriguingly as a potential player in the struggle against kidney and liver disease and metabolic syndrome.



Extreme gardener Stephen Barstow describes ground elder as 'perhaps the most invasive widespread introduced plant in gardens in Europe'. So why include a terrorist of the borders in a book about wayside plants?

We had not often seen ground elder outside a garden context until summer 2015, when we visited Loughcrew, in Westmeath, Ireland. There, along a quiet road, a few hundred yards from the nearest house, was a mass of

flowering ground elder. It was not just the dominant Apiaceae but the dominant plant, outmuscling nettles, herb robert, cleavers and other vigorous settlers.

So, yes, ground elder is largely a plant of gardens, but also waysides, churchyards and other disturbed habitats, sometimes as a garden discard. Its roots are said to grow up to a metre a year, and it needs only a few millimetres of root to clone itself, just as woodbine and couch grass

Apiaceae Carrot family

Description:

Perennial, with hairless, hollow stems, rhizomes and white stolons; pinnate leaves, resembling but unrelated to elder; attractive umbels of white flowers, to 1m (3ft).

Habitat: Gardens predominantly, also waysides, disturbed ground, woodland margins.

Distribution: Native to Central Europe, Eurasia; introduced to Britain, Western Europe, North America and other temperate regions.

Related species:

There are up to eight *Aegopodiums* worldwide but this is the common Eurasian species.

Parts used: Leaves, roots.

I have known a quantity of the roots and leaves boiled soft together, and applied to the hip in sciatica, keeping a fresh quantity hot to renew the other, as it grew cold, and I have seen great good effect from it.

– Hill (1812)

do. Incidentally, these other two invasives also have long-standing herbal uses, and we argue for ground elder in this respect. One English sufferer calls it Grelde, a 'seemingly immortal witch-weed', and Matthew's mother refused to take any rooted plants from our garden because we have ground elder. It is banned, declared toxic, in many states in the US and elsewhere.

The problem, unfortunately, is not new. In his lifetime John Gerard was as well known for his Holborn flower garden as for his *Herball* (1597). He writes with resignation: *Herbe Gerard groweth of itself in gardens without setting or sowing and is so fruitful in its increase that when it hath once taken roote, it will hardly be gotten out againe, spoiling and getting every yeare more ground, to the annoying of better herbe.*

Full of self-belief as he was, Gerard was not naming the plant after himself. St Gerard of Toul (935–994) was the patron saint of gout sufferers, and ground elder was used, even before the saint, as a home remedy for gout.

The plant had the medieval name bishopweed, perhaps because of the link between gout and the drinking habits of the higher clergy, or because ground elder was a monastic plant – useful both in the kitchen as a spring vegetable and in the infirmary for compresses and teas to relieve gout, rheumatism and sciatica.

Ground elder



Ground elder flourishing in a country lane. Loughcrew, Westmeath, June



Primulaceae
Primrose family

Description:

Perennials with large crinkly green leaves and pale yellow flowers in spring.

Habitat: Old woodland, ditches, hedgerows, banks, grassland and churchyards. Cowslips prefer more open grassy areas.

Distribution: Primrose is widespread through the British Isles, cowslips less common in north and west. Native to Europe and temperate Asia. Cowslip introduced to north-eastern US.

Related species:

Oxlip (*P. elatior*) is a separate, rare species. The hybrid of primrose and cowslip is known as false oxlip, *P. x polyantha*. Bird's eye primrose (*P. farinosa*) and Scots primrose (*P. scotica*) have violet or purple flowers and a localised distribution.

Parts used: Roots, flowers, leaves.

Cowslip is an under-used but valuable plant.

- Chevallier (2016)

Primrose & cowslip

Primrose, *Primula vulgaris* & Cowslip, *Primula veris*

These bright spring flowers cheer the spirits after long, dark winters, and are among Britain's favourite wild plants. They were once important medicinals, but could well be used again as safe remedies for treating insomnia, migraine, catarrh, arthritis and rheumatism, among other historic uses.

Primroses are one of the earliest spring wild blossoms – the name comes from 'prima rosa' or first flower (*primavera* in Spain and Italy). They are often still blooming when the taller cowslips join them a few weeks later.

It is the spring flowers that people love most. A survey carried out by the charity Plantlife in 2015 showed that bluebells were the nation's most popular flower, with primrose second and cowslip fifth. Perhaps it is their colour and freshness charming us after the long, dark winter, and no doubt these are the plants we loved in childhood, with early memories of woods and meadows.

Primrose attracted approving names, such as darling of April and ladies of the spring. But cowslip was from Old English 'cow-slop', or a plant springing up where cows in meadows deposited their dung.

If that was rather down to earth, cowslip was also known as bunch of keys or St Peter's keys, a name

inspired by the hanging flowers. These resembled the bunch of keys that St Peter metaphorically carried and could open the kingdom of heaven to a believer.

Interestingly, this name was a deliberate Christianising takeover of an earlier pagan (Norse) name: cowslip was once dedicated to the goddess Freya, the virgin of the keys. The keyflower plant or cowslip would open her own sexual kingdom. Such a myth had to be reconfigured!

The nodding head of cowslip may also have suggested a palsy (paralysis), and other ancient names included palsywort, paralytica and arthritica, the latter for the use of the roots for rheumatic and arthritic pain relief.

Coming up to date, cowslip has made a gratifying dramatic recovery from centuries of overpicking for making the popular cowslip wine or syrup. This practice has fallen into decline, and meanwhile local councils have widely planted