Plants of the Wood & Hedgerow

Bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* Coinnle corra

The bluebell is probably one of the best known and loved of our wildflowers. It is an erect perennial growing to a height of 20-50cm, producing bell shaped violet-blue flowers in April and May. The flowers have separate petals, but appear tubular, so are pollinated by long-tongued insects such as bumblebees and some hoverflies. Honey bees which have short tongues often visit the flowers, but steal nectar by pushing apart the base of the petals, and so avoid the style and stamens. The sap of the bluebell was formerly used as starch and also as a glue.

On the continent bluebells are surprisingly rare, being found only along the Atlantic coast of France, Belgium and Holland, Spain and Portugal and are very rare even as far east as Paris. The bluebell is primarily a woodland plant, but do not need woodland so much as humidity and continuity of habitat. They do grow in shady habitats such as woods, lowland hedge-banks and in bracken-covered pastures in the uplands but they also often occur in drifts on cliffs and off-shore islands, with very little cover from trees. Here, they may be the relics of a once more wooded landscape.

The name “bluebell” did not really come into common use until some of the Romantic poets, such as Gerard Manley Hopkins began to celebrate the flower early in the nineteenth century.

The Spanish bluebell *H. hispanica*, is a much stouter plant, with less nodding and more bell-like flowers which emerge from all sides of the stem. The flowers occur in purple, pink and white as well as blue. Commonly grown in gardens and naturalised in hedge-banks, churchyards and woodland edges. But most frequently naturalised varieties are hybrids between this species and the common bluebell. These appear wherever both parents are in moderately close proximity, even in ancient woodland. Because both the Spanish bluebell and the hybrid are better competitors than our delicate native species, if this is allowed to happen our native species will be in danger of local extinction.

Irish Spurge (*Euphorbia hyberna)*

The Irish spurge is a medium sized perennial plant that grows to between 30 and 60cm in height. Its stem and leaves are yellow green, and the oblong leaves are 4-8cm long, slightly hairy below. The leaves are inserted alternately on the stem except at the stem tops where they are whorled. The leaves often become red-tinged as the summer season progresses. The flowers are small (8-30mm wide) and not very striking, being only slightly more yellow than the leaves. On close inspection, small yellow glands are visible.

The Irish spurge grows on acid soils along woodland edges and hedgerows where partial shade is achieved and the soil remains damp. In Ireland it is found only in the southwest, particularly West Cork and South Kerry. It is rare in Cornwall, south-western England. The Irish spurge is one of a number of *hiberno-lusitanian* species of plants and animals. These species have a particular distribution being found mainly in western Iberia and along the western coast of Ireland.

The stems and leaves of the spurge contain a milky white fluid called latex. This is poisonous to animals and so the plant is avoided by grazing deer, sheep and cattle. In the past, the poisonous nature of this fluid was exploited by fishermen. They gathered spurge plants into a Hessian sack, which they then put into a stream or river. The river water flowing through the sack would then flush out the latex, which would stun any fish immediately downstream, allowing the cunning fishermen to make a good catch!

The future security of this rare plant is dependant on the conservation of the native woodlands on which it depends. Some evidence from south western England suggests that the spurge may be vulnerable to competition from the lush growth of bramble and honeysuckle that follows the cessation of coppice management. In southwest Ireland this is not a problem at present as the majority of our woodlands are heavily grazed.

Pignut *Conopodium majus*

This is a slender perennial plant that grows to a height of 20-80cm tall and is often found at woodland edge, in the hedgerow and along woodland paths and tracks. It occurs in well drained, acid soils. It is a member of the carrot family and has characteristically dissected feathery leaves. It is a vernal plant, carrying out most of its growth and flowering and setting seed early in the year, before the leaves of the trees unfurl completely. Once seed has set it usually withers away, remaining only as an underground tuber until the following spring. The flowers are tiny and white and produced in delicate umbels, and are most often seen among the bluebells in May. The name ‘pignut’ refers to the starchy underground tuber that is located about 6 inches below the surface. In former times, country children would gather these ‘nuts’ as a tasty snack, and this is the origin of the rhyme ‘here we go gathering nuts in May’.

Wood sorrel *Oxalis acetosella* Seamsóg (Seamair choille)

Wood sorrel is a delicate perennial, growing to a height of 10-20cm. It is a very common plant found all over the British Isles in cool shady woods, hedgebanks and even on shaded rocks high in the mountains. It can tolerate very deep shade and is often found growing among mosses and ferns in places too dark for other flowering plants.

Wood sorrel produces lilac-veined white flowers which appear during April and May, but apparently seldom set seed. As in the case of violets, seeds are formed by small cleistogamous flowers which do not open but remain hidden under the leaves and produce seeds. The entire plant is sensitive to touch, rain drops cause the seed case to "explode" thus dispersing the seed. It is also believed that the dispersal of the seeds is aided by ants. The flowers close before rain and before nightfall.
The leaves have a pleasant acidic taste similar to its namesake Sorrel, but should not be eaten in large quantities because they contain poisonous Oxalic acid. The leaves can be added to salads and sauces. Wood sorrel is found in Europe from Iceland and Norway across Siberia to Japan and as far south as central Spain and Greece. There are accounts of Native Americans feeding this plant to their horses to increase their speed and because of its trefoil shape it is thought by some to be the true shamrock.

Lesser celandine *Ranunculus ficaria* Grán arcáin (Aonscoth/Lus na gcnapán)

The lesser celandine is a low growing perennial which grows to heights between 5 and 30cm. It is a member of the buttercup family and is common all over Ireland, Britain, Europe and western Asia. It is one of the earliest spring flowers, opening on warm days from January onwards in many different habitats, but generally in places which are shady or slightly moist during the summer. The first flowers are usually found on sunny hedgebanks or on the sides of ditches, the surface of the petals shinning in the sun, and attracting various insects such as flies and bees. The plant can form extensive patches within woodlands, hedgerows, river banks and shady gardens. The heart-shaped leaves usually emerge before the flowers, and provide valuable winter grazing for a woodpigeons and deer and variety of other animals and birds. The plant dies down in early summer and survives as a group of fleshy roots.

The old English name of the plant, Pilewort refers to its former medicinal use of squashing the roots and mixing them with wine (or urine) and applying the resulting lotion for the relief of piles. Also medicinally it has been used to treat depression, gastritis, rheumatic pains and gall stones.

Wild garlic or Ramsons *Allium ursinum* Creamh

Wild garlic is an erect perennial plant, growing to a height of 20-50 cm. The broad leaves emerge in March, and white flowers are produced during late April early May time, the plant has finished much of its growth before trees come into leaf. The flowers are sweetly scented and their nectar attracts various flying insects.

Ramsons grow in similar situations to bluebells and often with them, but seldom actually intermix. Although they form dense and sometimes very large colonies, they rarely share space with other species – at least until their leaves begin to rot away at the end of May. They occur in a variety of habitats including the relatively rich, damp soils of old woodlands, hedgerows and river banks and even in scrubby scree and sheltered cliff-faces.

Despite their quite strong smell, ramsons are surprisingly mild to eat, especially when the leaves are young. Wild garlic was used in cooking until the garlic which we are familiar with today was introduced from the Mediterranean. In the past in Egypt it was elevated to godlike status. The broad leaf-blades can be used in salads, stews and soups. Medicinally it was used internally and externally as an antiseptic, especially during World War I.

Many place names in the UK have derived from the plant's Old English name – Ramsey Island on the Pembrokeshire coast and Ramsey on the Isle of Man.

Three cornered leek *Allium triquetrum*

The three cornered leek is a member of the lily family and is closely related to garlic, onion and leek. It is a spring species, its long, flat, linear leaves of bright green appearing in February or March. The flowers are borne on sturdy sharply three angled stems and appear between April and June. The clusters of white bell shaped flowers are similar to the bluebell, and sometimes the two plants are seen growing together. The three cornered leek is an introduced species and is sometimes found as a garden escape near old settlements. In Ireland it is found mostly in the south east of the country, but some populations are also present in the south west.

Wood anemone *Anemone nemorosa* Lus na gaoithe (Nead choille)

Wood anemone is a member of the buttercup family and is common throughout the British Isles. It is an erect perennial growing to heights of 8 to 25cm, found in woods, but sometimes also on sea cliffs or on heathy mountain sides, in places which may in the past have been wooded, but which have certainly been open for many hundreds of years. It is considered to be an indicator of old woodland and associated hedgerows as its seed is rarely fertile and so it spreads very slowly (less than six feet every one hundred years) through the growth of its roots

The young leaves and flowers emerge together in early spring and the plant disappears in early summer, surviving by means of its fleshy underground rhizome. The flowers are usually white with some pinkish-purple on the outside of the petals. Some of the petals may be pinkish, especially as they fade, some are even a very pale blue. The plant also has a southern European cousin that is bright blue in colour. This is the blue anemone (*Anemone apennina*) which is often planted into gardens and has in some places escaped into the wild.

Anemones are pollinated by beetles, flies and bees and are also sometimes known as the windflower, as they often are in bloom during windy conditions. The wood anemone was once worn as a talisman and was used as an early cure for leprosy. The whole of the plant is highly poisonous, but it has been used medicinally treat eye problems and lung infections. Richard Mabey reports that mis-understanding has resulted in the recording of 'wooden enemies' in some places!

Bugle *Ajuga reptans* Glasair chiolle

The bugle is an erect perennial plant that grows to between 10 and 40cm tall in hedgrows, woodlands and damp meadows. It has shiny, dark green leaves with wavy edges on square stems. The small flowers (2- 4 cm long) are blue with an upper and lower lip and the lower lip may have white streaks in it. Flowering occurs between April and June and the flowers occur in whorls, with flowers all the way around the top of the stem. The bugle was a popular plant with Elizabethan gardeners and 'variegated' (with white and green leaves) and bronze leaved varieties are available in garden centres today. Because the leaves are present throughout the year it is useful for ground cover in rockeries etc. In medieval times the Bugle were used extensively as a 'wound herb', it's leaves crushed and applied directly to bruises and wounds to help cure them. Because it was often used to stem bleeding from tools and agricultural implements one local name for the Bugle is 'Carpenter's Herb'. It is still used by modern herbal medicine practitioners to treat sore throats and is a natural insecticide.

Foxglove *Digitalis purpurea* Méaracàn dearg

The foxglove is most common on acid soils, and is found throughout the whole of the British Isles and much of Europe. It can be found in open places in woodlands, and on open hillsides, among rocks and on old walls. It is often found in areas where the ground has been disturbed, cleared or burned. The plant is an upright biennial with an unbranched stem which is covered with grey felt-like hairs. It has oval leaves and grows to a height of 50-180cm, producing tubular pink/purple flowers from June to September. As a biennial plant, it completes its lifecycle over two years, only flowering in its second summer.

Each plant can produce thousands of seeds, so it can quickly colonise a suitable area, such as where a wood has been cleared or coppiced. The flowers are pollinated by bumble bees which crawl right up into the flower. The bees visit the lowest flowers first, which has usually already shed its pollen and has a stigma ready to receive pollen from the previous plant. The upper flowers have ripe anthers and the bees then transfer this pollen to the next plant they visit.

An extract from the plant is used to treat cardiac disorders. In homeopathy foxglove is used to treat weak heartbeat, kidney trouble, depression, insomnia and migrane. However, all parts of the plant are poisonous even when dried and should not be collected by the amateur.

Yellow pimpernel *Lysimachia nemorum*

This pretty little flower may be spotted anytime between May and September in damp woodland, acid grassland and even occasionally on heath and bog edges. It is a creeping plant, with reddish stems and opposite oval-heart-shaped leaves. The flowers are bright yellow, and less than a centimetre wide, and arise in pairs on rather long stalks. There are several theories as to how this plant obtained its latin name – Lysimachos means loose strife and there was an ancient belief that this and certain other plants had the power to calm agitated farm animals!

Golden rod *Solidago virgurea*

This unobtrusive flower is one of the few species found in heath and woodland to flower late in the season. The golden yellow flower does not appear until July, or even August in some sites, and persists through September. The plant varies greatly from site to site and may be anything between 30 and 180cm in height. Two types of leaves are present. At the base there is a loose rosette of dark green, spoon-shaped leaves. Along the length of the stem the leaves are narrower and spear-shaped. There are several larger and showier relatives of this species that are commonly grown in garden borders. The wild type was formerly widely used in herbal medicine, for treatment of gall stones and as a gargle to cure ulcers.

Primrose *Primula vulgaris*

The primrose is a popular favourite and also loved because it is the harbinger of Spring. In fact, in some districts primroses can be seen in flower as early as January, although February to May is the main flowering period. This fact may be the reason for the Latin name which comes from 'prima rosa' meaning 'first rose'. The wrinkly spoon-shaped leaves occur in tufted rosettes and are often downy on the underside. The flowers occur in two forms: 'pins' which have a long female style and short anthers, and 'thrums' which have the opposite. This is an evolutionary mechanism that forces the plant to outbreed. Primroses are usually seen in hedges and woods, but can also grow on mountain tops and open hillsides where some shelter is provided, e.g. under dense bracken. In herbal medicine, primrose is described as having a 'dry' nature and it was formerly used to induce sneezing and clearance of phlegm from the head!

Navelwort or Pennywort *Umbilicus rupestris* Carnán caisil

This is a fleshy leaved biennial that occurs on walls, acid rocks and occasionally on rotting wood. It has round leathery pale green leaves with wavy margins, with a central depression, hence the name navelwort. The flowers occur in long slender spikes between May and August and may vary in colour from greenish-white to cream with a reddish tinge. This plant is rather rare in central and eastern parts of Ireland, probably because of its sensitivity to frost. It was formerly used in herbal medicine to treat liver disorders and also chilblains and piles!

Star Sedge *Carex echinata*

This is one of the more common sedge species of woodland, particularly in damp patches among alder and birches. Its leaves are keeled like those of all sedges, and are fairly narrow and long, approximately 1-3mm wide. The plant is named for its small brown flowers which are arranged in a star-like shape. The flowers can be seen from May to July and the fruits persist on the stems until well into the Autumn.

Herb Robert *Geranium robertianum* Earball rí

This plant grows very abundantly in hedges, woods and grassy verges and is easily known because it is almost constantly in flower. It is a member of the geranium or cranesbill family and has dissected leaves that are broadly triangular in outline and reddish, hairy stems. The flowers are purple and regular, with 5 petals, and the fruits are slightly wrinkled and beak-like, with 5 segments that split explosively to scatter the seeds inside. In herbal medicine, a decoction of herb Robert was applied to wounds to aid healing.

Honeysuckle *Lonicera periclymenum* Féithleog

The honeysuckle is a woody stemmed climbing plant found in native woodlands and hedgerows. It is probably best known for its rich fragrant scent. The flowers are long and tubular and are cream in colour, often tinged with red or lilac. They are found in clusters of 10-12 between May and August. In the evening time these flowers emit their sweet smell to attract the long tongued moths that act as their pollinators. A large amount of nectar is offered as a reward, and once pollinated the flower's colour deepens to an orange/reddish colour. The honeysuckle also provides colour in the Autumn as its vivid scarlet berries develop. These are highly poisonous however.

Hedge Woundwort *Stachys sylvatica*

This plant is a rough hairy perennial with square stems and toothed oval leaves on long stalks. It can grow up to one metre in height and is found in field margins, hedgerows and woodlands. The long loose spikes of dark red-purple flowers are quite attractive, but the plant has a strong unpleasant smell when bruised. The flowers appear between July and September and are visited by bees and other long tongued insects.

Fuschia ***Fuschia magellanica***

The fuschia is a bushy shrub that grows to heights of about 3 metres. It is a native of South America and is sensitive to frost, but it thrives in the mild climate of south western Ireland and indeed has become a characteristic feature of the hedgerows of Kerry and West Cork, especially the Dingle and Beara. The stems are deep red in colour and the flowers which appear in July and August are very attractive. They comprise outer petals of deep red-pink, with an inner ring of purple. Dark red stamens and styles protrude from the centre of the flower. They are pendulous and hang, like ballerinas wearing tutus abundantly along the lanes and small roads.

Ground Ivy ***Glechoma hederacea***

Despite its name, this plant is not related to Ivy, but is so-called because of its ability to produce dense ground cover. It is a hairy creeping herb, with round or kidney shaped leaves which have regularly scalloped margins. The flowers appear in March (or February if it is particularly mild) and last until June. They are pale or deep purple and are irregular in their shape, with two small lips above and three below. The leaves have a rather pleasant, somewhat bitter aroma, and the plant was previously used to flavour beer, and in some places was known as Alehoof.

St. John's Wort ***Hypericum perforatum*** **Lubh Eoin Bhaiste**

This is a slender, hairless perennial herb that may grow up to 1 metre in height, but is usually 30-50cm. The stem is rounded but on close examination, two raised lines can be seen on opposite sides. The oval leaves are stalkless, and are distributed on the stem in opposite pairs. Looking closely at the leaves while held up to the light will reveal many tiny translucent dots or perforations, hence the species name, 'perforatum'. The regular yellow flowers are deep yellow and contain many stamens. The plant is poisonous to livestock, sensitizing their skin to sunlight. St. John's wort has been used in recent times as a herbal remedy for the treatment of depression, and oil in which the flowers have been soaked is said to alleviate eczema and psoriasis. The **tutsan,** ***Hypericum androsaemum*** is a close relative of St. John's Wort, but is larger and bushier and is often woody at the base. It is frequent in woods and thickets and has flowers up to 2cm across.

Common Dog Violet ***Viola riviniana*** **Wood Dog Violet** ***Viola riechenbachiana*** **Sail chuach**

There are several species of violet found in Gleninchaquin (see Heath & Bog Plants) but these two are particularly common in the wooded areas and hedgerows. As with most of the violets, the leaves are heart shaped and gently toothed, and occur in clumps. The flowers of these two species are very similar, being violet in colour, but the common dog violet has a creamy coloured spur while that of the wood species is violet. In addition, the latter species has slightly smaller flowers, is found in deeper shade and finishes flowering about a month earlier than the common dog violet which can be seen from March until late May, or even June in the uplands. Sometimes, there is a second period of flowering in September and October.

Meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria* Airgead luachra

This is a hairy perennial with creeping rhizomes and erect leafy stems, usually about a metre tall, although this can vary considerably. It is found in wet and marshy parts of grasslands, and also in damp woodland, ditches, hedgerows and riversides. It is best known for the heads of frothy, creamy white flowers that are produced between June and September and give rise to its other name, Queen of the meadow. Meadowsweet was used in medieval times as a strewing herb, scattered on the floors of houses to produce pleasant smells. It was also used to sweeten mead and in the treatment of rheumatism. The roots are a source of a black dye.

Bramble *Rubus fruticosis* Dris

Like its relative, the roses, the bramble is actually a number of closely related species. Brambles have woody stems, armed with prickles and flowering in their second year. Their leaves have 3-5 toothed leaflets, and the flowers vary from pinkish mauve to white, appearing between June and August. The fruits are the much loved blackberry, which is a popular wild food, and also the source of a purple dye, as collectors often find out! In addition, the roots of bramble can be used to obtain an orange dye, and the leaves have been used as dressings for wounds and for tea-making.

Dog Rose *Rosa canina,* Field Rose *Rosa arvensis* Rós

There are tens of species of wild rose all of which hybridise to form intermediates. These two species are fairly common. Both have arching thorny stems and grow in the hedgerow and woodland edge. The dog rose is known by its strong, hooked broad-based prickles and in June and July has pale pink or white flowers, solitary or in small clusters. The field rose has more brittle sparse thorns and its white flowers appear in July and are usually in groups of 2-5 at the tips of stems. The fruits of the wild roses, rose hips, are very rich in Vitamin C, and during World War II, volunteers gathered tonnes of these for this purpose. Children often use the scratchy seeds from inside the hip as a natural itching powder!

Woodrush *Luzula sylvatica*

This is a common plant in woodlands over acid soils and is also sometimes a sign that an area was formerly wooded. At a glance it looks like a grass, with pale green, flat linear leaves. The tell-tale sign is the presence of silky white hairs at the leaf margins, and the open panicle of rather small brown flowers that is seen May and June.

Bilberry *Vaccinium myrtillus* Frochan

This is an erect bushy shrub with pale green oval leaves up to 2 cm long and green stems. It is a member of the heather family and is closely related to cranberry and cowberry. It is commonly found on heathlands and in acid woodlands and on the drier parts of bogs. It is very sensitive to grazing and provides important food for wild animals and birds, but is soon grazed out where sheep and goats have access to the land. In the summer, tiny pink-white bell type flowers appear and by August the sweet, blue-black berry or 'hurz' can be found on the plant. The berries are very sweet and were widely eaten in the past – Fraochan Sunday, the last Sunday in July was celebrated in the past in Ireland, as this was the traditional time to gather the berries. The berries are also a source of a dark dye and collection for this purpose was common in places such as Shropshire, where dye-making was an important part of the local economy.

Bush Vetch *Vicia sepium,* Common vetch *Vicia cracca* Pis

The vetches are straggling, climbing herbs, members of the pea family. They are known by their leaves which are usually divided into opposite pairs of leaflets and by their tendrils, which they use to help them to climb over other vegetation in the hedgerow. As members of the pea family, they have special nodules in their roots in which special nitrogen fixing bacteria are found, and this makes them soil improvers and they themselves quite nutritious. In continental Europe, farmers still grow large amounts of common vetch to use as fodder for their animals. The flowers are the characteristic pea shape. In common vetch, they are purple-pink and are visible between May and August. Bush vetch has a longer flowering period, from April to November, and the flowers are more a lilac in colour, with darker purple venation.