

The red campion: scorpion scarer and soap substitute

Our local hedgerow flora is at its most prolific now, and among the most obvious blooms is the red campion (*Silene dioica*).

Red campion is a hairy, diffuse perennial growing up to a metre in height, and dioecious. Its leaves are oval, being egg-shaped towards the base, much narrower higher up. The flowers form a loose inflorescence, and are rarely really red but vary from a purplish pink to a pale pink. Flowering occurs between March and November. The male plant has 10 stamens and the female five styles. Pollination is by flies and bees, and close growth is necessary to ensure fertilisation. Seeds are small and black, ripening from June to August.

The genus *Silene* is large, comprising about 700 species of annuals, biennials and perennials. It is widespread throughout the northern hemisphere, with the greatest concentration of species occurring in the neighbourhood of the Mediterranean.

Another common member of the genus in Britain is the white campion (*Silene latifolia*), which is usually annual. It has larger blooms, which open fully in the evenings and give off a delicate scent. Hybridisation between red and white campion produces pale pink flowers.

Red campion has limited uses in folklore. It offered protection against the stings of scorpions — throwing the plant at a scorpion rendered the creature harmless. The root of



the plant was used as a soap substitute in washing clothes.

John Gerard in his 1633 *Herbal* noted the resemblance of the flower to a button, and one common name was “bachelors’ buttons” (a name that is now more usually applied to the cornflower). It was commonly carried in the pocket to indicate the state of one’s love affairs.

Pregnancy testing and other strange uses for nettle leaves in folklore

The common stinging nettle, *Urtica dioica*, is a much neglected commodity, probably overlooked by sophisticated society because of its plenty and wide distribution. And yet it has a habit of jumping into our attention from all manner of associations.

I have recently come across a new aspect of the folkloric background to the nettle story. In some parts of the country it provides a means of testing for pregnancy. A sample of urine is used to float a nettle leaf. If the donor of the urine is pregnant, orange spots will appear in the nettle leaf. This belief contrasts with another strange idea, that a wad of nettle leaves worn inside a sock for 24 hours before sexual intercourse acts as a contraceptive. The idea is said to be of gypsy origin.

Nettles thrive in fertile, muddy ground that is subject to disturbance. They abound among the lush herbage of river valleys and woodland glades where animals feed, since they thrive on phosphates. Ancient nettle dumps often mark the sites of deserted villages.

Nettles have long been a prized article of the human diet. The young leaves boiled and mashed, mixed with oatmeal and again boiled have served as a soup.

For jaundice, nettle ale was prepared from the boiled roots, fermented with yeast and bottled. The infusion was drunk to cure the rash due to the juice when daffodils were harvested for market. Beaten on the affected part, the plant relieved rheumatism. It was believed to deter flies if suspended in the kitchen or larder.

The historian William Camden (1551–1623) noted that the Roman soldiers who accompanied Caesar brought nettle seed to Britain, having been warned that the climate was harsh and they would need extra warmth provided by whipping limbs with nettle plants. Later on, people were told that when stung by a nettle it was necessary, when applying the dock, to repeat the mantra “nettle in, dock out; dock in, nettle out; dock rub nettle out”. Chaucer knew the formula.

How Europe leads the world in heavy drinking

Around the world, and not least across Europe, alcohol presents an increasing threat to public health. In the 2 June issue of the *BMI*, Tessa Richards comments on the phenomenon. She notes that in any global comparison Europe comes top among the regions for heavy drinking.

The overall consumption of alcohol in the EU has not changed markedly in recent years, but there has been a sharp rise in the prevalence of harmful patterns such as under-age and binge drinking. And women now drink more. The UK Institute of Alcohol Studies recently reported that adults in the UK drink 11 litres of pure ethanol per head per annum.

The public health arm of the European Commission is studying a new strategy adopted last October because of the risks posed by heavy drinking. Excessive alcohol consumption is the third greatest cause of premature illness and death in the EU. Only tobacco and high blood pressure take precedence. One in four deaths among young men and one in 10 among women aged 15 to

29 are attributable to alcohol. Most of them result from drink-related motor accidents or violence. Much of the harm connected with alcohol drinking affects not the drinker but persons close to them.

Alcohol has become progressively cheaper and more accessible across Europe, and this increases its consumption. Supermarkets now offer a wider range of alcoholic products in contrast to tobacco counters where health warnings have multiplied. The co-operation of brewers, wine producers, advertisers and retailers is being sought to evaluate moves towards lessening harm produced by alcohol.

France has already banned broadcast advertising of alcoholic products and has stopped the industry from sponsoring sport. Similar moves have been made by Finland. In the UK, the Government has promoted educational campaigns.

Raising the cost and restricting availability will contribute something to curbing the growing teenage drinking culture. But much more needs to be done urgently.

Cleaning away the superstitions

“It is the hardest thing in the world to shake off superstitious prejudices; they are sucked in, as it were, with our mother’s milk; and growing up with us at a time when the fastest hold and make the most lasting impression, become so interwoven with our very constitutions, that the strongest sense is required to disengage ourselves from them.” — Gilbert White: *‘A Naturalist’s Journal’* (1793).

And I quote . . .