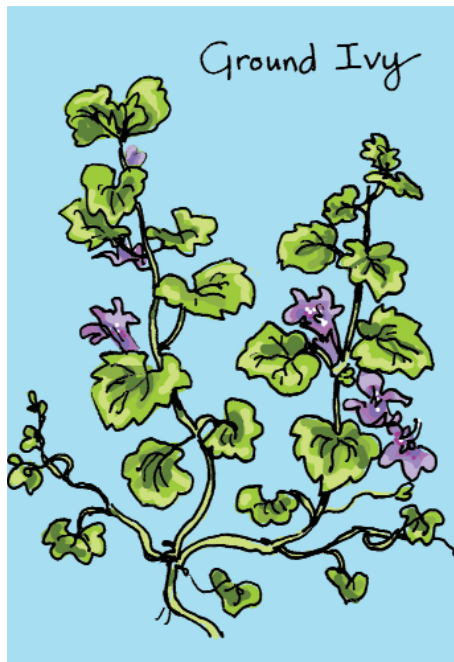


Soothing sore eyes

The ground ivy (*Glechoma hederacea*) is an attractive little plant with violet blue blooms, lurking rather shyly among the grasses of hedgerow bottoms and on the verges of woods and damp rough pastures. It ranks as a dead nettle and is distributed almost everywhere throughout these islands. It was once called "blue-runner" on account of its tendency to form large clumps united by vigorous underground runners.

The plant has a rough, strong aroma, so that when brewing with hops became popular ground ivy was one of the choice bittering agents added to a brew when a tasty beer was sought. This custom led to the adoption of its alternative name, "ale-hoof". Yet the plant also found a medicinal application in the soothing of sore eyes. It is claimed that gamekeepers who had their eyes badly inflamed by exposure to gunpowder fumes discovered that an infusion of the plant was a useful material for irrigating the inflamed organs. The idea was reputedly derived from the gypsies. A handful of ground ivy in a saucepan was covered with water, boiled and allowed to simmer for 20 minutes; when cool the water was strained off and used to irrigate the inflamed eyes. The product was smooth and a little oily, with a pleasant fragrance, and was used generally as a cosmetic lotion for many purposes. The expressed juice from the



entire plant was once used to relieve bruises and black eyes. It was taken internally for kidney and liver complaints and painters used to take it to counteract lead-induced colic. Applied in the form of a poultice the plant was used to heal abscesses and tumours.

Panacean orpine

The crassulaceous plant commonly known as orpine is botanically *Sedum telephium*. It goes by a host of local names, including arpent, heal-all, Jacob's ladder, and midsummer men. As the last name indicates, the plant is prolific in summer, when its grey-green flaccid leaves are topped with sparse flower heads usually of a pinkish colour. The plant is rather a recluse and chooses shady hedge banks and the edges of woodland copses. It is nowhere common, although widely distributed throughout Britain. Colonies that are found near habitations may represent escapes from cultivated garden species.

In folklore, orpine is a divinatory plant. In midsummer sprigs of it used to be inserted in pairs in the cracks of beams and joists. They represented pairs of sweethearts, whether they came to lean towards one another or otherwise indicated if the romance was progressing or not. If one of the implants withered this foretold the death of one of the pair.

Orpine leaves were at one time eaten in salads. They also had medicinal applications, being recommended against fever, sterility in women, excessive menstruation, and internal ulcers. It is recorded that Napoleon in exile took orpine when he thought he was suffering from cancer. It was reputed to relieve pain from fresh wounds and all manner of ulcers, and was probably more widely resorted to than we are generally given to understand.

Street children's health problems

Two doctors from Geneva have made some comments in the 30 June issue of *The Lancet* concerning the possibility of interventions to reduce the harm that accompanies drug abuse by adolescents. They wish us to consider the situation as it affects, in particular, homeless young people.

UNICEF has defined street children as individuals younger than 18 years who spend most of their time wandering on the streets. It is estimated that worldwide there are between 10 and 100 million street children and youngsters, most of them in developing countries.

Among these children the problems of mental and physical health are substantial. The provision of medical care poses enormous challenges to the organisations that are working with this population. Studies have indicated that 69 per cent of a sample of homeless individuals seen show dependence upon at least one substance. Since March 2005 a day centre in Honduras run by *Médicins Sans Frontières* dealt with 632 street children and young people who were given medical and mental health consultations, mostly concerning reproductive problems, substance abuse, depression and physical trauma. Young people who were given a standard treatment aimed at the effects of substance abuse reported significantly less abuse of the drug, relief of depression and improved social stability.

It is encouraging to notice that homeless young people can indeed be encouraged to enter into treatment with benefit. Another report from Austria discusses the recent increase in alcohol abuse there. The proportion of adolescent patients admitted to hospital with alcohol poisoning has increased over the years, but the publicity attached has been the most obvious reaction. Measures are being introduced to reduce the accessibility of alcohol. At the moment, adolescents younger than 16 are not allowed to purchase hard drinks in clubs and bars. However, public opinion is divided on the subject.

Watching out for domestic abuse

A note in the 23 June issue of the *BMJ* comments that doctors and other health professionals need to be more vigilant for signs of domestic abuse in those with whom they come into contact. A report recently produced by the profession says that certain questions need to be asked to enable them to undertake prompt action, and all health professionals should have training in how to deal with abuse when it appears.

There are four main types of domestic abuse — physical, sexual, psychological and financial; all have long-term effects on the victim. Health problems resulting can include fractures, burns, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic pain syndrome, arthritis, problems with hearing and sight, headaches and seizures. Indirect consequences may include stomach ulcers, heart disease and raised blood pressure.

Research among women who had been domestically abused showed that most would choose a doctor in order to discuss their situation. If necessary, doctors are able to offer effective support to victims, such as referral to expert agencies, but inappropriate questioning to try to identify the abuse may do more harm than good.

Domestic abuse is common and affects all sectors of society, with some vulnerable groups including the disabled. It is estimated that half a million elderly people are abused at any one time in the UK, most of them by family members. Some three in 10 women and two in 10 men have experienced abuse at some time. One in 20 women suffer serious injury or long-term health problems. Eighty per cent of victims are women and 30 per cent of abuse starts in pregnancy. Many individuals never report being abused for fear of social stigma or because they do not know who to contact. Some are not in a position where they can seek a remedy. Men are less likely to seek help because they do not think they will be taken seriously.