

Thought for the month June 2017

The cheerful sight of May or Hawthorn blossom in hedgerows and fields heralds the approach of summer. Its flowering is determined by spring temperatures and altitude, in the Dales variations can range from mid May to late June, although in Malham Tarn for example with an altitude of 388m it has been recorded as blossoming in early July*. In rural areas May has been linked with myth and folklore more than any other British plant, it plays a central role in May Day festivals, its foliage surrounds the Green Man, symbol of rebirth, and it remains the subject of superstition, possibly dating from the Reformation when sprigs of May were placed in the windows of recusant households as a clandestine sign of Mass being held within. In the country May marks the change from one season to another: when the May flowers winter is over, hence the old adage 'ne'er cast a clout 'till May is out'. Until then, the late April weather is full of surprises, we are tossed around by changing climatic conditions like boats at sea: the 'Spanish Plume' during Easter 2015 brought basking temperatures as hot air drifted North. This year sees something of a reversal with an icy finger descending from the North, alarming farmers and gardeners alike with the threat of frost, but old hands and canny farmers are unlikely to be caught out and wise enough to know that 'owt can 'appen in April'. Thankfully it's been a good year for lambing, arguably the most important event in the Dales calendar, the weather has been kind when it mattered and the new lambs gambolling in lush green fields with hedgerows white with May are testament to that.

But blossom, as we know, is essential to the fruit that follow. The Cherry harvest is an important crop in Switzerland where annually 2,200 metric tons are required for Cherry Brandy, jam and consumption; the Cherry harvest is a major event, much as lambing is in the Dales and bad weather at the wrong time will result in a poor crop. Frost in May is unusual in Switzerland, occurring perhaps once in every forty years and special measures are required to avert crop damage. In centuries past Swiss farmers would invoke Eis Heiligen, or Ice Saints to protect the blossom, these days the farmers no longer rely on Eis Heiligen but their special measures are no less evocative and equally magical in appearance: Cherry orchards are lined with hundreds of candles which when lit generate sufficient heat to maintain the blossom above freezing; the more sophisticated farmers use braziers, the effect is the same. The warmth from the candles protects the blossom, encourages bees to pollinate and the flowers to set fruit for the season ahead.

As the blossom of May, or Cherry appear in field and hedgerow it is worth remembering their role in the turning of the year as we pass from one season to the next.

* Mabey, R. Flora Britannica 1997