



Hawthorn (Whitethorn)

John Feehan, is well known for his award-winning television work on the natural and cultural heritage of the Irish landscape, lets us into the secrets of the hawthorn, a plant mentioned in many well known Irish poems and songs, like Hank Locklin, who longed for home: ‘I’d sooner see the hawthorn tree/ By the Old Bog Road’.



The question as to what flowers were actually for is one that has engaged the human mind since we first set our eyes on them in the Garden of Eden (whether we interpret that as a real place or a metaphor for wherever it was in time and place that the human mind had evolved to the point where it could ask such questions). What are they FOR? Why did God create them? The question was framed against

the background of a presumption that whatever the answer, God had created everything for us. Everything else in creation had been brought into being to serve us in some way: when it came to plants, as food, medicine, building materials and so on. It is only a few hundred years since we began to realize that they are not there in the first place for us at all, but for their own sake.

'Each creature has its own purpose', *Laudato Si'* reminds us. 'The creatures of the earth were not created in the first instance for us to dispose of as we will, regardless of their place in God's plan. They are primarily for the fulfilment of God's own unfolding plan for Creation' (LS, 53, 84). Our response to their beauty – and beauty is the first thing that catches our eye and holds our attention in flowers – is a faint, faint echo of what God sees in them. We are, if you like to think of it like this, placed in this Garden of Eden to share in God's own wonder and delight at his creation; ourselves alone endowed with that gift of mind that enables us to tend and nurture it as God wants us to tend it.

The flowering of hawthorn in May is celebrated above all other species, in the folk tradition not only of Ireland but of all the countries of northern Europe because it so evocatively proclaims the arrival of summer. It is a plant of the woodland's edge in nature, needing lots of light. The introduction of agriculture 6000 years ago greatly increased the area of suitable habitat for it, when hawthorn became the defining species of the hedges we use to parcel grazing and croplands into fields, where it bursts into such profligate extravagance of bloom as summer opens that it catches every eye: especially last May and doubtless again this year, when the limit on the distance to which our COVID-restricted eyes can wander is narrowed to what is before our eyes and under our noses, and we wonder why we never saw these things before us for the

first time, because now maybe we are looking for the first time.

And speaking of noses! Our sense of smell is powerfully alerted by hawthorn. The main ingredient in that so-distinctive smell is a chemical called trimethylamine. This is a smell to which flies and beetles are especially attracted, and these are the insects whose pollination services the flowers are seeking. They visit in large numbers for the nectar, which is readily accessible. Although the strongly aromatic smell is not entirely pleasant – it sort of hovers on the boundary between sweet and slightly sickly – the mixed character of the scent also attracts numbers of bees. You might like to know that picked at their best (which is in the middle of May) and steeped in brandy with sugar, the flowers are said to make an extraordinary liqueur!

You will have no difficulty identifying the different parts of the flower if you can remember our January lesson! There are five sepals, sharply turned back (reflexed), enclosing a little bowl that contains the nectar; five petals perched on the rim of the bowl, and inside that a ring of many stamens. In the centre is a 1-chambered ovary on which stands the column of the style, and on top of that the broad knob of the stigma. This is ready to receive pollen as soon as the flower opens. A day or two later the stamens raise themselves up and spread out, and the anthers begin to split to release their pollen, the outer ones first.

After fertilisation the rim of the

nectar bowl closes over to enclose the developing ovary. Structurally the fruits – the familiar haws – are like little apples, and are a critical source of food in autumn and winter for birds such as blackbirds and redwings. At one time they were considered of medicinal value in treating kidney stones and edema.

In that long-ago Garden of Eden where we first saw it, bursting into blossom as spring gave way to summer, few flowers have lifted our spirits as hawthorn or whitethorn: the may-tree. It's no surprise that May blossom is celebrated in the poetry of so many different peoples and cultures. But surely none will be more familiar to most readers than that hymn we used to sing so regularly

and fervently in what now seems a long-ago age of a different piety. *O Mary! we crown thee with blossoms today, Queen of the Angels, Queen of the May.*

It may come as something of a surprise to learn that this was only written some time in the late nineteenth century by an American composer named Mary E. Walsh. If you have forgotten some of the words you can read all four verses on a dozen websites. And can I suggest that you memorise a verse or two, and whisper them with new appreciation as you bury your face in the blossom snowfall of the may-bush on a COVID-restricted walk in the weeks to come? ♡

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