

## WHY DO I LIKE PLANTS?

*Eileen Shone*

This is a question I have been frequently asked over a thirty-five year career as a biology and science teacher. It doesn't matter how old the students are - eleven or eighteen - they just don't get what I find fascinating about plants. Usually they are incredulous: 'but they are green and boring', being the standard response. My answers vary from 'because they give us food and medicines' to 'because they are beautiful' or 'they're strange', or 'because of the language used'.

On a recent talk given to the East Yorkshire Group by Geoff Hodge, he named specific tissues such as parenchyma - a lovely word, meaning soft, succulent types of cellular tissue. How often are we reminded of the botanical words used to describe colour (*alba; lutea*), habit (*prostrata*), origins (*japonica; asiatica*)? The language used to describe our plants also references people at the forefront of discovery, many long dead (*darwinii; Banksia*), and some held dear in the nation's psyche (*attenboroughii*). But with some groups of students the science of why I like plants is forgotten along with the finer details of the Calvin cycle, and who wouldn't want to forget that.

Why do I like plants? It's memories: of childhood, where I grew up, family members, and events. The first seeds I ever planted were Virginia stock, along a narrow strip between the path to the front door and the driveway. I'd have been three years old and I loved them - still do. Walks in the fields developed my curiosity and taught me how to identify scabious, salad burnet, bindweed and scarlet pimpernel. The botanical names came later, along with an appreciation of how the local geology affected what would and wouldn't grow. Sunderland is on magnesium limestone and this has helped to develop my understanding of growing on calcareous soils. My own garden now is on the chalk of the Yorkshire Wolds.

The seasons also inspired in those early days. Spring saw primroses and wood anemones give way to bluebells and early purple orchids. This continues to the russets of autumn, dark brambles and the reds of hips and haws. Once married and settled in my own home, plants took on other meanings too. Lily of the valley is the flower of my wedding. *Rosa* 'New Dawn' grows from a cutting from my late mother's garden. *Clematis* 'Victoria' and *C.* 'Elizabeth' are allowed to scramble, given by my other half in tribute to my daughters on the occasion of their births. I grow primroses and wood anemones to always remind me of the country walks with my uncle.

When I listen to talks from visiting speakers I often wish I could grow plants requiring ericaceous conditions but the geology of my garden isn't appropriate. I won't try to modify the pH of my garden soil, and there are limits to the size of planters I can accommodate. So I have scabious, grown from collected wild seed. Much to my amazement a bee orchid turned up in one of the borders, and two years later a *Dactylorhiza*. The ones I bought to keep them company didn't return! On the down side, I also have bindweed. Can't have it all, can you?

Then I love the complexity of plants: structures, colour, shape and form, be it the leaf, stem, flower or fruit. Why some have scent and some don't, why some produce nectar and some don't. The peculiarities of plants' life cycles and how they go about attracting pollinators is like science fiction (it took millions of years to evolve the flowering plant!), and I also like mosses, ferns and horsetails, which go back even further than the dinosaurs.

So now you know why I like plants. Why do you?