

In My Garden, May

*...the air softened and warmed as she moved,
The blue sky smiling, none too soon,
With the small shy mouth of a new moon.*

CAROL ANN DUFFY

It is ten years since I bought my house, ten years since I started my garden, ten years the longest time I have lived at one place in my life. The nonexistent garden, a redundant field, sharply north facing slope gnawed down by centuries of grazing sheep. The soil a nice rich fibrous loam, water retentive but free draining. Encased on three sides by hedge banks, sheltered by trees to the northeast, good views at the top down to a brook and out over woodland and fields. Masses of nettles and creeping thistles were rapidly thwarted by spraying some random brown stuff I discovered at the back of the shed, one good strong hit wiped out the lot!

A floral hors d'oeuvre of roses will commence in May: 'Agnes' a rugosa hybrid with a Persian rose, fully double, amber coloured, with an exquisitely musky raspberry scent. Alba roses, are an ancient race. I grow 'Alba Maxima' the Yorkist's rose, flushed pink in bud opening double white and richly scented. Equally smelly and old is 'Great Maiden's Blush', the softest lightest delicate pink. Such typical Englishness, the French more fittingly named it 'Cuisse de Nymphé Emue' literally 'Passionate Nymph's Thigh'! Such primness brings to mind the vision of big soppy Victorian maids blushing, possibly swooning, at the merest glimpse of the postman's ankle flesh! And if you wanted to see a splendid example of this nymph's passion a neighbour along the lane past Woolridge X has the finest bush in Dolton. Alba roses have large greyish-green leaves and a gently weeping habit suggesting an exhausted shrug.

'Dunwichensis' is a scotch rose, a variety of native *Rosa spinosissima*, growing in sandy terrain never far from the sea, according to Gerard's Herbal from 1597:

"... in a pasture as you goe from a village hard by London called Knights bridge unto Fulham, a village thereby".

Compact, covered in prickles hedgehog-wise, flowering especially freely the cream/white flowers have great bosses of glistening yellow stamens.

The rose flowering zenith arrives mid-summer but May gives an amuse bouche (and nez? and yeux?) before the main banquet is finally served.

Do insects instinctively know of certain health giving qualities plants possess? Aronia is in flower, bees swarm avidly amongst the blossoms, you can easily see pink pollen attached pannier style on their back legs. The pure white flowers attract a great gathering of other insects too. A medium sized shrub from the eastern side of North America related to pears, quince and hawthorn, its berries, resembling minute apples described as "The healthiest fruit in the world" having exceedingly high anti-oxidants levels. Immediately they ripen they are devoured by birds. How quickly they strip the fruits from the blackcurrants too, are they getting at all that vitamin C?

Other plants highly attractive to insects are often therapeutic to us humans. The dead nettle family Lamiaceae; hyssop, lavender, sage, (it's very name *Salvia* means health) rosemary, mint and thyme have been used as medicinal herbs for millennia. Many of the other herbs that are greatly sought after are members of the carrot and daisy families, parsley, caraway, cumin, fennel, sweet cicely, chamomile, tansy, echinaceae and feverfew. Are these types of plant helping the insects too? The hyssop for example only has to have one or two miserable flowers half-open and every bee for miles around wants to visit it. Are they feasting so avidly upon the pollen and nectar in order to gain the equivalent medicinal benefits as us?