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Home > Advice > My love of wild flowers

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my love of wild flowers

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All my life, I have been in love with wild flowers ... so much so I published a book documenting 500 of Britain's most beautiful specimens. Read on for an extract which explains why I'm so fond of our wild flora and how the book came about.



Expeditions in the Morris Minor

In the Seventies, as a girl, I used to go botanising with my father, John Raven, who was a Classics don at Cambridge. From when I was seven or eight, we would go on trips together in his Morris Minor (later replaced by a mustard Mini Clubman), with a couple of ham rolls, a bottle of fizzy apple juice and a large bar of Fruit & Nut...

We would see pasque flowers on Therfield Heath in Hertfordshire, oxlips in Hayley Wood in Cambridgeshire, fritillaries in Magdalen Meadow, Oxford. Farther afield, we would find mountain avens tucked into the limestone pavements of the Burren in Ireland, sea-lavender on the salt marshes of the Norfolk coast and exquisite miniature alpine plants high on the hills of Argyll.

My father was an *expert amateur botanist*. He inherited his love of the natural world from his father, Charles Raven. Between them, astonishingly, they painted almost every plant in the British flora. On their expeditions, whenever they found a new example, they would get out their paints and record it that night in their lodgings or, if it was too rare to pick, paint it in situ. I still have 18 volumes of their watercolours.

I have less patience than my father ever did, but he taught me how to look with an eagle eye and, even more usefully, how to botanise at 30mph. We used to drive along lanes – not too fast and not too slow – me looking out of the window at one verge, him at the other, shouting out whenever we spotted a cracker.

High-glamour creatures

Getting to know wild flowers adds a new layer to the way you experience the world. An ordinary walk is suddenly full of a new cast of characters. Some you will know already, plants that appear reassuringly in the same places year after year: primrose, bluebell and dog-rose. These will become old friends. But you will also gather your favourite rarities, high-glamour creatures, such as frog orchid, fly orchid, white water-lily and the perfect single flowers of grass-of-Parnassus, each stem exquisite and strange.

Of course, there are bores, as in any party. I do not love dog's mercury, and I can take or leave dandelions. But if you look, you will find their more intriguing relatives, hawkbits, just round the corner, some pale and modest, others a bit racy – a touch of orange here, a splash of lemon there. Even the thugs are interesting: Indian balsam, butterfly bush and Japanese knotweed, all shockingly brutal in their way. The point is that a party where you know half the guests is always going to be more fun. What was just background becomes a world in itself.

Continuing to learn

My father died when I was 17, and that was the end of my formal botanising trips for 20 years. I did not stop

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loving wild flowers, I just stopped hunting them. Particularly on trips abroad, I still would find myself wandering down a lane just to see what wild flowers were there. Then, recently, it struck me that this was how I was spending my most absorbed, relaxed and happy times. That moment of realisation is what lies behind my book *Wild Flowers*. When I took up botanising again in earnest to begin my research, I worried that most of the interesting wild flowers would have gone. The facts and figures certainly made uncomfortable reading.

During the second half of the 20th century, we ploughed, drained and "improved" – with fertilisers or herbicides – almost all of our ancient meadows; others were abandoned and grasslands became rank and dominated by bracken. The UK Biodiversity Steering Group estimated that 97 per cent of lowland semi-natural grassland in England and Wales disappeared during the 50 years to 1984, with the surviving meadows now fragmented and often degraded. Almost all our meadow plants are rarer as a result, with green-winged orchid, for example, now vanished from half its historical range and in many counties reduced to a handful of sites.

Our roadsides have fared little better. Until the mid-20th century, a lengthman carrying a scythe was employed to cut back the vegetation along every road and lane. The cut material was raked and stacked for a week or so, leaving time for the seeds to drop into the sward, encouraging wild flowers. Now, our roadsides are cut by toppers, the cuttings left where they fall, over-enriching the environment. This has vastly increased the growth of grasses and tall, strong growers such as hogweed and common nettle.

All is not lost

However, while there is no room for complacency, all is not lost. In my research, I have had a revelatory couple of years finding one life-enriching flower after another. Inevitably, I had to make some tough choices when choosing which plants to put in, and which to leave out. I decided to profile the species that you were most likely to see when going about your daily life, as well as a few that are rare but extraordinary.

Photographer Jonathan Buckley and I travelled to more than 100 different sites to track down the flowers. Sometimes I would find 20 or 30 plants in one place, and Jonathan would lie on his stomach for hours at a stretch photographing them. We agreed his pictures should not take the usual botanical specimen approach, which always seems to involve standing above the plant and photographing it like a shot rabbit.

The deepest possible delight

My greatest hope is that my book might encourage you to look at wild flowers with fresh eyes. If you feel inspired to go on an expedition of your own, the best starting point is your county's Wildlife Trust website. If you cannot find a site in your area, look at the National Trust, Woodland Trust or Plantlife websites. We all need to fall in love with wild flowers.

It is not just about biodiversity and a healthy environment. It is also about us, our connection to nature and the deepest possible delight that can be derived from feeling at home in a spectacularly flowery world.

To start your own love affair with wild flowers, embark on your own [Spring wild flower adventure](#) ...

Buy a signed copy of [my Wild Flowers book](#), featuring beautiful photography from Jonathan Buckley .

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