



## Robert Burns

Burns celebrated many plants in his poems and songs although he only dedicated one of them to a plant '*To a mountain daisy*' (1786). He mentions his favourite plants and trees in a letter in 1789. One of more famous lines concerns the poppy and the transience of beauty and pleasure. He uses his knowledge of Scottish folklore and custom including the use of ragwort by witches and the custom of choosing a sweetheart by placing hazelnuts in the fire.

**Favourite plants:** in a letter to Mrs Dunlop on New Years Day 1789 he states '*I have some favourite plants in spring, among which are the mountain daisy, the harebell, the fox-glove, the wild brier rose, the budding birch, and the hoary hawthorn, that I view and hang over with particular delight*'.

**Tam O Shanter:** this poem contains one of Burn's most famous lines '*but pleasures are like poppies spread, You seize the flower its bloom is shed*'.

**Witches:** Burns writes in his '*Address to the De'il*' in 1786 of the Scottish belief that witches rode ragwort - '*Let warlocks grim, an wither'd hags, Tell how wi' you, On ragweed nags, They skim the muirs an' dizzy crags, Wi' wicked speed; And in kirk-yards renew their leagues, Owre howkit dead*'.

**Mary Queen of Scots:** Burns writes in his '*Lament of Mary, Queen of Scots*' '*Now blooms the lily by the bank, The primrose down the brae; The hawthorn's budding in the glen, And milk-white is the slae; The meanest hind in fair Scotland May rove their sweets amang; But I, the Queen of a' Scotland maun lie in prison strang.*'





**To a Mountain Daisy:** Burns compares the fate of a daisy uprooted by the plough to a maid deflowered - *'Such is the fate of artless maid, Sweet flower of the rural shade! By love's simplicity betray'd, Any guileless trust, Til she, like thee, all soil'd, is laid low I' the dust.'*

**Burning the Nuts:** in his poem *'Halloween'* Burns refers to the old custom of burning the nuts in which each hazelnut was named for a boy or girl and laid in the fire, and if they burned quietly together or jumped apart that would be the course of the romance - *'The auld guidwife's weel-hoordet nits Are round an' round divided, And monie lads' and lasses' fates Are there that night decided: Some kindle, couthie, side by side, An' burn the gither trimly; Some start awa wi' saucy pride, And jump out-owre the chimlie. Fu' high that night.'*

**Plea for Bruar Waters:** in 1787 Burns sent a letter to the Duke of Atholl to plead humbly for the beautiful waterfalls of Bruar to be accompanied by suitable vegetation - *'Let lofty firs, and ashes cool, My lowly banks o'erspread, And view, deep-bending in the pool, Their shadows' wat'ry bed: Let fragrant birks, in woodbines drest, My craggy cliffs adorn; And, for the little songster's nest, The close embow'ring thorn.'*

**Birks of Aberfeldy:** Burns also penned a poem about the beauty of the trees and plants around the falls of Aberfeldy. The area is still a popular walk with a statue of Burns at the bottom.

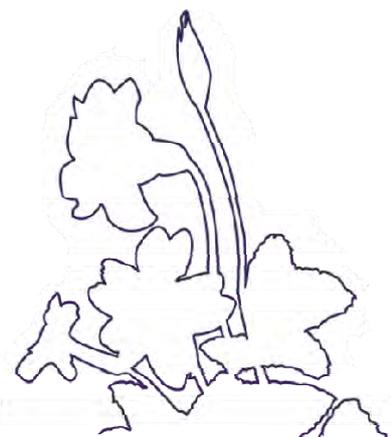
**Burns Sycamore:** a large sycamore growing in the grounds of Alloway Auld Kirk is known as the Burns Sycamore. Burns mentions the church in *'Tam O' Shanter'* and it is believed that the tree may have been growing in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

**Places to Visit:**

Burns Birthplace Museum (National Trust for Scotland) - <http://www.burnsmuseum.org.uk/>)

Burns House & Burns Mausoleum  
Dumfries (<http://www.dumfriesmuseum.demon.co.uk/frames.html>)

Souter Johnnies Cottage (<http://www.nts.org.uk/Property/Souter-Johnnies-Cottage/>)





## References:

Burns R. Complete Works

Milliken W. & Bridgewater S., 2004, Flora Celtica

Savage, F, 1926, Shakespeare's Flora and Folklore

Stokes J., Rodger D., Miles A., Parker E. 2004 The Heritage Trees of Britain and Northern Ireland

### *A selection of some of the plants mentioned in the works of Burns*

**Ash** (*Fraxinus excelsior*) - Mentioned in the Humble Petition of Bruar Water

**Birch** (Birk) (*Betula pendula*) - Mentioned in the Birks of Aberfeldy, as one of his favourite spring plants, and in his plea for Bruar Water

**Cowslip** (*Primula veris*) - Mentioned in Composed in Spring

**Daisy** (*Bellis perennis*) - One of Burns favourite spring plants; To a mountain daisy; mentioned in the Lament of Mary, Queen of Scots

**Fir** (*Abies species*) - Mentioned in the Humble Petition of Bruar Water

**Foxglove** (*Digitalis purpurea*) - One of Burns favourite flowers; Mentioned in the Elegy on Captain Matthew Henderson

**Harebell** (*Campanula rotundifolia*) - One of Burns favourite flowers; Mentioned in the Elegy on Captain Matthew Henderson

**Hawthorn** (*Crataegus monogyna*) - One of Burns favourite plants; mentioned in the Humble Petition of Bruar Water

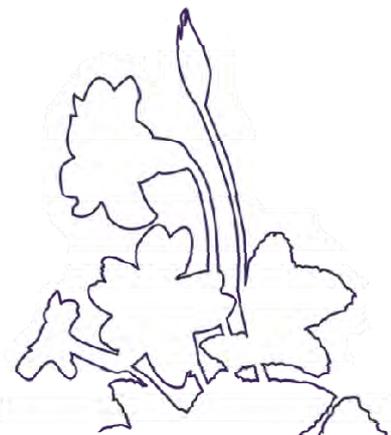
**Hazel** (*Corylus avellana*) - Mentioned in The Auld Farmers' New Year Morning Salutation to his Auld Mare Maggie; the nuts mentioned in Halloween

**Heather** (*Calluna vulgaris*) - Mentioned in Song Composed in August

**Honeysuckle** (Woodbine) (*Lonicera periclymenum*) - Mentioned in Phillis The Queen O' the Fair; the Humble Petition of Bruar Water

**Lily** (not specified but could be Lily of the Valley) (*Convallaria majalis*) - Mentioned in the Lament of Mary, Queen of Scots

**Poppy** (*Papaver rhoeas*) - Mentioned in Tam O' Shanter



**Primrose** (*Primula vulgaris*) - Mentioned in Lament of Mary, Queen of Scots

**Ragwort** (*Senecio jacobea*) - Mentioned in Address to the De'il

**Rose/Dog Rose** (*Rosa species, Rosa canina*) - One of Burns favourite flowers; mentioned in Epistle to James Smith; Elegy on Captain Matthew Henderson

**Rue** (*Ruta graveolens*) - Mentioned in Kellyburn Braes

**Spear Thistle** (*Cirsium vulgare*) - Mentioned Epistle to Mrs Scott

**Sycamore** (*Acer pseudoplatanus*) - There is an old sycamore in the grounds of Alloway Auld Kirk named for Robert Burns

**Thyme** (*Thymus species*) - Mentioned in Kellyburn Braes

**Violet** (*Viola species*) - Mentioned in Composed in Spring

**Willow** (Saugh) (*Salix species*) - Mentioned in The Auld Farmers' New Year Morning Salutation to his Auld Mare Maggie

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