

## Shakespeare Plants



Wild plants and trees are central to Shakespeare's works and he makes liberal use of their diversity of cultural associations (beauty, poison, romance, sorrow) to create imagery that would be very familiar to his audiences. We still recognise some of these images today such as the rose as symbol of love and beauty and also of the warring factions of York and Lancaster, but many of these associations are now largely forgotten such as Falstaff's snowing eringoes and Coriolanus' fields of corncockle.

### *Plants in Shakespeare's Work*

Shakespeare displays an in depth knowledge of the plants of the fields, meadows and woods and their qualities, but also plants of medicine, witchcraft, love potions, poisons and exotic imports. In all he writes of more than 90 plants which are native or naturalised in Britain. His plants are used to create imagery which reflects the actions and thoughts of his characters (good, evil, sloth, love, romance, superstition, playfulness, luxury, sorrow, remembrance) but they also provide material support to his plots in the form of gifts, poisons, food stuffs, and objects.

His knowledge of plants would have come in part from his rural upbringing in Warwickshire including local customs and superstitions. He would also have had access to the information and images of the age which included a range of herbals (William Turner's Herbals, the German herbalists (Fuchs, Brunfels and Bock). the great age of discovery and exploration



These herbals were available in many countries and the attributes of the plants described would have been understood widely throughout Europe, certainly by the educated classes. He lived and worked within the diverse cultural and ethnic communities of early modern London and would have been influenced by the great age of discovery and exploration around him.

The cultural associations of particular plants would have been reinforced through their depictions in art (embroidery, paintings, tapestry, clothing, heraldry, books, and prints), for example plants on the clothes worn by Elizabeth I in her portraits. The Tudor and Stuart periods saw a great expansion in the creation of embroideries for the home, and the popularity of pattern books which provided stylised templates for flowers, fruits, birds and animals.

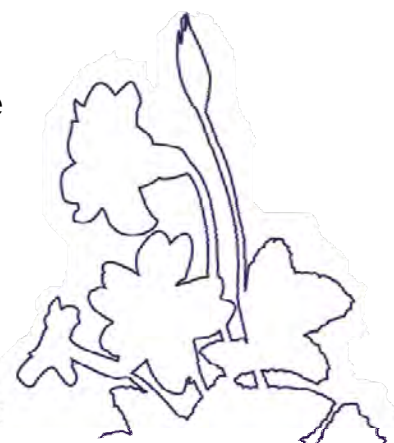
### Particular plants


Roses, violets and pansies are usually invoked as symbols of love, romance or as elements of idealised or magical settings. The pink (relative to the cultivated carnation) is one of the most familiar flower images in both the Medieval and Tudor periods and in Shakespeare is used to infer good manners. Mercutio claims he will be '*the pink of courtesy*' (*Romeo & Juliet*).

Eringoes (the candied root of the sea holly) were a luxury foodstuff and are called upon by Falstaff to snow upon him in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Primroses are used in both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* to warn against the pleasantries of the path to perdition.

Nettles appear in the floral crowns of both Ophelia and King Lear to infer their loss of reason. Fields and meadows filled with corncockles, docks, thistles, burs and fumitory are several times used to create the image of corruption, decay and neglect of both the countryside and the state. In contrast cowslips, burnet and green clover are used to portray the right state of things under good management.

Shakespeare's poisons include hemlock and aconite, the insane root (Savage believes that this may be henbane), and his witches brew in *Macbeth* includes yew. Wild plant foods such as pignuts and samphire would have been familiar to many of his audience.





Willows as symbols of sorrow and loss occur in *Othello*, 'She had a song of willow, and old thing 'twas, but it express'd her fortune, and she died singing it', but also in *Hamlet* in the place of Ophelia's death, and the willow garland is used mockingly in *King Henry VI Part III*.

The flowers of death and remembrance are central to the death of Imogen/Fidele in *Cymbeline* where Arviragus promises that her grave shall not lack 'the flower that's like thy face, pale primrose; nor the azure'd hare-bell like thy veins, nor the leaf of eglantine'. The azure'd hare-bell is thought to be the bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*) and this is the only mention of the plant so characteristic of British woodlands, and that went on to become associated with both Shakespeare himself and St George. It was wore in the lapel on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April to celebrate both St George's Day and the anniversary of Shakespeare's death.

Many of Shakespeare's plants would be very familiar to us today, but some have declined both locally and nationally. In particular the cockle (*Agrostemma githago*), is now thought to be extinct in most of the arable fields of Britain and is in sharp decline across Europe. The Adonis flower of *Venus and Adonis* has been identified as both Pasque flower and Fritillary both of which have suffered severe losses in many counties. These plants and others like the crow-flowers (*Lychnis flos-cuculi*) and long purples (probably one of the Orchid species) are particularly vulnerable to the loss of meadows and unimproved grasslands.

### Specific plays

Certain plays contain more plant imagery than others, some more familiar than others. The image of *Hamlet's* Ophelia handing out her pansies and rosemary, and wearing her garland of flowers will be familiar to many, as will King Lear's crown of weeds and the daring sapphire gatherers. However the flowers central to Imogen's burial scene in *Cymbeline* may be less well known, as well as the imagery of wild plants used

by Burgundy in his attempts to argue for peace between Henry V and the King of France.

The setting of *The Tempest* makes wide use of plants and trees and Coriolanus uses the imagery of the corn field overrun with cockles to reflect an unruly and ill-managed nation.



**Project Ideas for the Patchwork Meadow:** if you would like to contribute a square to this theme of the Patchwork Meadow please type 'Shakespeare's Plants' in the 'Project Line' of Online Submission Form. You can also upload audio and video files to accompany your square so feel free to work with friends to combine artwork and performance. We are currently looking for venues for temporary or permanent exhibition of the Shakespeare squares after their the launch at the Wild North Festival in summer 2013.

You can contribute a Shakespeare square in any textile art form, any design. Why not have a look at some of the historical images of plants from the 16th and 17th centuries? Or perhaps you come from or have connections with one of the countries where Shakespeare's play are set (Italy, Cyprus, Denmark, France etc), or one of the countries where Shakespeare's work is performed or enjoyed?

### Places to visit & online resources

- The Ashmolean Museum (collections of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century textiles and images)
- The Bodleian Library (<http://www.vam.ac.uk/>) (collections of Elizabethan Embroidered Book Bindings)
- The Burrell Collection (collections of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century textiles and images)
- The Folger Shakespeare Library (<http://www.folger.edu/>) including 'The Trevelyon Miscellany' (1608)
- The Globe Theatre (<http://www.shakespearesglobe.com/>)
- The Royal School of Needlework Collections (Hampton Court Palace) (tours of the archives are available, the archives contain flower images from a range of historical periods (see the Visiting the RSN page at <http://www.royal-needlework.org.uk>)
- Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust (<http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/home.html>)
- Shakespeare Gardens - Wikipedia lists 29 Shakespeare Gardens across the world ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shakespeare\\_garden#List\\_of\\_Shakespeare\\_gardens](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shakespeare_garden#List_of_Shakespeare_gardens))
- The Victoria & Albert Museum (<http://www.vam.ac.uk/>) (collections of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century textiles and images)



## References:

Shakespeare - The works of Shakespeare are available in a wide variety of print formats and can also be found online (<http://www.shakespeare-online.com/>)

Ellacombe, H.N, 1884, *Plant-lore and Garden-craft of Shakespeare* (London) - (available online from the Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/>)

Savage F. G., 1923, *Shakespeare's Flora and Folk-lore* (Stratford-on-Avon)

Crane, W., 1906, *Flowers from Shakespeare's Garden: a Posy from the Plays*

More modern works on Shakespeare's flower include:

De Bray, L. 1982, *Fantastic Garlands: an anthology of flowers and plants from Shakespeare*

Kerr, J. 1997, *Shakespeare's Flower*

Owens, F. 2001, *Shakespeare's Flowers*

This project is supported by the Culture Programme  
of the European Union

