



Autumn, foraging and myths and legends

Gardening writer and gardener, Geoff Stonebanks, talks about autumn colour, mythical plants and all things magical and mysterious in the garden

Whilst autumn is a perfect time for foraging in the garden in search of edible plants, associated myths and legends often link specific plants to folklore, spiritual beliefs or even supernatural occurrences particularly as the year slowly draws to a close. For example, mistletoe was once seen as a symbol of spirit by the Druids.

Foraging in the garden

Foraging in gardens can involve collecting plants

like berries, fruits, herbs and edible flowers, depending on your garden's contents. We have probably all got something in our garden that can be foraged through the course of the year! In the autumn, lots of fruit can be collected, like my own Cox's Orange Pippin which produces masses of apples each year! Far too much to eat, so I tend to peel and poach them and place in the freezer to use throughout the winter months. I also have a lovely pear tree in the garden that produces a good crop too.

A very versatile plant to have in the garden is Crambe Maritima or sea kale, perfect for a



seaside garden like mine! Sea kale has large, lobed, wavy-edged leaves that can grow up to 75cm high and the young leaves are edible. In early summer, it produces dense racemes of small white flowers. The young, blanched shoots are the most prized part of sea kale, eaten like asparagus. The very young leaves can also be eaten raw or cooked and the unbloomed buds can be used as a broccoli substitute. Sea kale has a slightly bitter, cabbage-like flavor when fresh, especially in the leaves. It is best grown outdoors in well-drained soil, ideally in full sun or partial shade. It can be grown from seed or from root cuttings. The young shoots are harvested in late winter and early spring, while the leaves can be harvested throughout the growing season.

Another edible plant is Angelica, which can be used in various ways in the kitchen, from candying the stems for cakes to using the leaves and roots in savoury dishes. It's a versatile plant with both culinary and medicinal applications. The traditional use of Angelica is as candied decoration for cakes and pastries, young, tender stems are boiled until soft, peeled and then candied in sugar syrup. The leaves can be eaten raw or cooked and they have a licorice flavour and are often used in salads or added to stewed fruit. Young stems can also be used to make a delicious angelica jam.

It's crucial to be aware of poisonous plants and to identify edible plants correctly before consuming them.

Myths and legends in gardens

Plants have long been associated with various symbolic meanings in folklore, mythology, and



spirituality. Many plants are linked to superstitions, with some believed to bring good or bad luck, or to ward off certain evils. Plants are often featured in magical practices, spells and rituals, with some believed to possess healing or protective powers. Here again, Angelica features, as the name would suggest, Angelica is certainly an angelic plant, full of good magic! Legends say that a holy monk dreamed of talking with an angel, who showed him an herb that could cure the bubonic plague – and it just so happened to be Angelica.

Healing powers

Many of us probably have some sage growing in our plots. It has become a widely used ingredient in our food dishes today, but did you know the herb has a long history of being used for its healing properties? The scientific name for sage is Salvia which comes from the Latin word Salveo, "to heal" or "to save".

The Romans regarded sage as a holy herb. They used it to clean their teeth and believed it aided memory function. The Romans and the Egyptians both used the herb to preserve meat and to help with fertility.

In the Middle Ages, sage was used as medicine. An old English practice was to eat sage every day in May, which was thought to grant immortality, and fresh sage leaves were said to cure warts, which may be due to their antibacterial properties. During this time, people would use sage to cover rotting meat, both to help protect themselves and cover the smell, which may be why it is still so commonly used with roasting meat now.



Elder Tree



Holly

Lustful gods

Another common garden herb is mint! Next time you stumble across a bit of mint that has escaped its garden spot, think twice about pulling it. According to Greek myth, mint is actually the goddess Minthe, transformed by a jealous Persephone. Since Hades couldn't restore Minthe to human form, he gave her a pleasant scent so everyone could appreciate her charms. Ancient Romans thought Venus wore a crown of mint and that the plant could incite lust. Maybe we're more concerned about flavouring our cocktails than inciting lust, but on the other hand perhaps you're looking to do both?

Sunshine on the darkest days

A common garden plant, especially in the run up to Christmas is holly. Druids in ancient Ireland and England believed the evergreen foliage of a holly could bring the sun into homes during the winter, so it turns out, there's more than one reason to bring holly sprigs indoors beyond ramping up festive decor!

The rose has been an adored flowering shrub for centuries, a sentiment shared among people of



Digitalis Panther

different cultures all around the world. Legend has it that once, all roses were thought to be white, until Venus, the Roman goddess of love, cut herself on the thorns and turned the flower red forever with her blood. For that reason, many associate the rose with love and romance.

Elder Mother

The elder tree is a truly magical plant. All parts of the tree can be used for their positive benefits, like food and medicine. The English elder comes from the Anglo-Saxon word, *aeld* meaning fire. In elder tree folklore, the tree was believed to host a powerful spirit called the Elder Mother. People hung dried elder leaves to ward off evil from their home, and it was thought to be a lucky omen if an elder tree grew near your home, as it would offer protection to your household. Use of the elder tree required asking permission through a ritual, and if not asked, it is said the Elder Mother would seek revenge against the person who had offended her. In some Christian legends, the elder tree has been given negative connotations. It was thought that Judas Iscariot hanged himself on the tree after betraying Jesus. It is also said that the wood used in the crucifixion came from this tree, although it is unlikely the weight of the wood could bare the weight of a man.

Hard hitting foxgloves

A common plant in many gardens is the foxglove.



Aster 'Barbados' (Island Series)



Miscanthus Nepalensis

Foxglove is the common name for plants in the Digitalis genus, used in ancient times as a drug, and still used today in some heart medicines. Digitalin, a cardiac glycoside that can be extracted from the plant, can help steady rapid heartbeats and arrhythmias when used in small doses. However, the constituents of this beautiful flower were also used as a poison in old times, since these same cardiac glycosides are highly toxic, and best kept away from pets and small children.

A tree of knowledge

Another popular myth surrounds both laurel trees and shrubs. They have a long regal history. You've heard of a poet laureate? The word laureatus is Latin for "crowned with laurel" and Medieval universities would crown graduates with a branch of the tree. It's not just a tree of knowledge. Ancient Romans thought they would be protected from lightning

strikes and plague if one took shelter under a laurel tree. In Greek mythology, after a battle with the dragon Python, Apollo was said to have cleansed himself with laurel to provide protection from the slain dragon's spirit. And during the witch madness of the Middle Ages, the wood of the laurel was thought to provide protection from witches as well as lightning.

Late summer colour

Thinking purely about autumn, some great plants for the garden are asters and chrysanthemums. I have both at Driftwood. The asters are Island Series Barbados, such a bright dazzling colour. It is a neat, compact Michaelmas Daisy, the mauve-purple flowers are a tonic for fading borders from late summer to autumn. This cheery perennial is free-flowering, attracting attention from pollinating insects which are drawn to the nectar-rich flowers. The upright stems and colourful blooms make this a lovely cut flower too. A useful perennial for providing late summer colour at the front of perennial borders.

Chrysanthemums are a sure sign that autumn is on its way and are a great choice for filling your garden with gorgeous colour late on in the season. Compact and naturally dome forming Chrysanthemums make great potted plants, and they will look just as good forming neat domes in your beds and mixed borders. They come in a fabulous mixture of autumnal shades and will become smothered in hundreds of flowers to create a carpet of colour.

Grasses make beautiful autumn additions to your garden, one of my favourite is Miscanthus Nepalensis which forms bold clumps of elegant green foliage. In summer, airy plumes of yellowish drooping flowerheads are held high above the foliage, which persist into the autumn and develop into architectural seedheads. It's ideal for growing in sunny borders and gravel gardens. For best results, grow in a sheltered spot and protect from frost in winter, or grow in a container, which I do, that you can move somewhere frost-free in autumn.

Happy gardening.

You can find out more about Geoff and his stunning, coastal garden, at: [Driftwood by Sea](#)