



Wild flowers *of the uplands*

HELEN LAWLESS



Walkers in the Galtees, heading towards Galtymore.

LITTLE MOUNTAIN BEAUTIES

Following on from last summer's article on heathers (*IML98*), this article introduces you to some of the wildflowers commonly found on the Irish mountains in late spring and over the summer. These plants are all found on the damp, acidic grassland, heaths and blanket bogs that cover most of Ireland's mountain areas. All are small, low-growing plants, but their beauty rewards the effort required to spot them.

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Lousewort with its ragged leaves and hooded, pale pink flowers, photographed at Keadeen, Co Wicklow.

Lousewort

Lus an ghiolla *Pedicularis sylvatica*

Lousewort flowers from April to July and is one of the first flowers you will come across in the wetter parts of the hills. It is a low creeping plant, with ragged reddish leaves that look a bit like Lollo Rosso lettuce.

Despite its unattractive name, Lousewort produces beautiful pale-pink flowers, up to 2cm long. Lousewort is a semi-parasitic plant that attaches to the roots of host plants (usually grasses and heathers) to compensate for the poor supply of nutrients in its bog and heath habitats.

Lousewort was believed to spread lice to sheep and other animals, and while this is the origin of the plant's name, it remains unproven. However, it has been shown that Lousewort could possibly be involved in the transmission of liver fluke, as Lousewort grows in wet areas where in winter small snails that can carry liver fluke embryos cling to plants. These could be transferred to sheep that graze over the land. Sheep afflicted by liver fluke are almost sure to have lice too.¹

Tormentil

Néalfartach *Potentilla erecta*

If there's one flower you'll definitely come across on the Irish hills, it is Tormentil. Its bright-yellow, four-petalled flowers dot the slopes from May to September, and often into October. Tormentil is both widespread and abundant and will be found growing in wet grassland as well as on heaths and bogs. Its flowers are small, typically 7-11mm in diameter. Despite its small size,



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Tormentil's cheerful yellow flowers dot the hills for almost six months of the year.

and having four petals instead of the usual five, Tormentil is a member of the Rose family.

The thick roots of Tormentil contain a lot of tannin, a plant compound normally derived from tree bark, that is used extensively for tanning leather. During the 18th century, Ireland was particularly



Heath Milkwort growing among grass on the slopes above Doolough, Co Mayo.

lacking in trees and in 1727 the Irish Parliament awarded £200 to William Maple for discovering that leather could be tanned using Tormentil roots. In 1729, Maple published his findings in a pamphlet entitled *A Method of Tanning Without Bark*. This contained an illustration of a Tormentil plant and has the distinction of being the first illustrated botanical work to be published in Ireland.²

Tormentil also had a range of traditional medicinal uses, mainly to do with the digestive system. Its roots were boiled in milk and the milk then given to calves and children to cure them of colic. The name 'Tormentil' reflects this, as it comes from the Latin *tormentum*, which means both torment and the pains of colic.³ Tormentil is still used in many herbal remedies to treat digestive problems and toothache.

Heath Milkwort

Na deirfiúríní *Polygala serpyllifolia*

Heath Milkwort is a slender, inconspicuous plant with dark leaves. It grows principally in wet heaths, but could also be found in hill grasslands, growing to a height of about 15cm.

Heath Milkwort flowers from May to September, but I have come across flowers as late as December in the Maumturks and the Wicklow Mountains. Its flowers are most often deep blue in colour, but you will also find mauve, pink and even white versions. These little flowers (5-6mm long)

are really beautiful and best appreciated through a hand lens.

Milkwort's colour variations account for its folk-name, 'four sisters', which is reflected in the plant's Irish name, *na deirfiúríní*.³ Heath Milkwort is very similar to Common Milkwort, which is found on less acidic ground. Heath Milkwort has lanceolate or spear-shaped narrow leaves. The lower leaves are always in opposite pairs (unlike Common Milkwort).

Milkwort's Latin name, *Polygala*, means 'much milk' and Classical authors recommended it to nursing mothers for promoting the flow of milk after childbirth. However, there seems to be little evidence of its success in folklore.⁴

Heath Spotted-Orchid

Na circíní *Dactylorhiza maculata*

Heath Spotted-Orchid is Ireland's most common orchid⁵ and one of our most delightful upland flowers. Heath Spotted-Orchids will be found from May to August, growing in damp acid grassland and heath.

Like many of its relatives, Heath Spotted-Orchid is variable in colour, but the flowers are most often pale pink with purple streaks and spots. It has narrow, pointed leaves, usually with dark spots, hence the name. Heath Spotted-Orchid is an upright plant (10-30cm) with a dense flower spike that is attractive to bees, which in turn pollinate the flowers. The lower lip of the flower has three lobes, with the centre lobe smaller than the other two. This is the easiest way to distinguish Heath Spotted-Orchid from the similar Common Spotted-Orchid. While Heath Spotted-Orchid prefers acidic ground, the two are sometimes found side by side, and you may also come across hybrids.

Orchids are particularly slow-growing plants and may take several years to reach flowering stage. Orchid seeds are amongst the smallest in the plant kingdom. The tiny seeds, which are scattered by the wind, have no food reserves. Germination relies on the presence of a fungus, which the orchid exploits for nutrients. Orchids are dormant in winter, with tubers, stems and buds all underground.

Common Butterwort

Bodán meascáin *Pinguicula vulgaris*

Common Butterwort is one of our most distinctive upland plants – its rosette of yellow-green leaves (about 5cm across) clings to the ground in a star shape. Common Butterwort is found on wet



The beautiful upright spikes of Heath Spotted-orchid, growing below Ballineddan, Co Wicklow.

heaths and bogs, usually on bare ground and where water seeps from crags and rocks.

The violet flowers of Common Butterwort appear between May and July each year, as a single flower (about 1cm across) on a leafless stem of 5-10cm high.

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The bright yellow-green leaves of Common Butterwort, growing in their distinctive star shape on the lower slopes of Ben Bury, Co Mayo.



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Close-up of Round-leaved Sundew with trapped insect. This plant often grows on bare peat.

Butterwort, like Sundew (below), survives in a nutrient-poor environment by supplementing its food supply with an insect-based diet. Butterwort's tongue-shaped leaves are covered in microscopic glands that exude a sticky substance. If the glands are touched by a drop of rain, or a grain of sand, nothing happens, but if they come in contact with any nitrogenous material such as the body of an insect, the glands discharge an acid fluid that dissolves the insect. The resulting solution, which includes mineral salts, nitrates and phosphates, is then absorbed by the plant. The edges of Butterwort leaves are curled slightly inwards; if an insect alights near the margins, the leaf slowly curls a bit more, bringing additional glands in contact with the prey and thus hastening its absorption.⁶

A related species, Large-flowered Butterwort (*Pinguicula grandiflora*), is found mainly in Kerry and west Cork. Its rosette of leaves can be 10cm or more in diameter, with a flower up to 2cm across.

The spur at the back of the flower is notably longer than on Common Butterwort. Large-flowered Butterwort is not found in Britain; it is one of our Lusitanian species, with its nearest location in the mountains of northern Spain and southern France.

A third species, Pale Butterwort (*Pinguicula lusitanica*), is found mainly in the west of Ireland. It has small, greyish rosettes (1-3cm wide) and much smaller, pale pink flowers.⁷

Butterwort is also known as bog violet and in Ulster is known as St Patrick's Staff, due to the resemblance of the shape of the flower to a staff. It was said that one of the flowers sprang up wherever St Patrick's own staff touched the ground on his travels over the bogs.³

In common with other plants such as Bog Asphodel and Sundew which grow in the same habitat, Butterwort was believed to cause ill-health in sheep and cattle. Butterwort was used a substitute for rennet in cheese-making, and the name

Butterwort comes from the plant's ability to curdle milk.²

Round-leaved Sundew

Druchtín móna *Drosera rotundifolia*

The small white flower of Round-leaved Sundew opens only briefly in sunshine, and it is more often seen in bud form. The plant's appearance and its dietary habits are more remarkable than its flower. Like Butterwort, Sundew is an insectivorous plant. Sundews are found on wet heaths and bogs (often on bare peat or amongst Sphagnum mosses) at low altitude. The plants can be very small, and due to their reddish colour are at first difficult to spot.

Round-leaved Sundew has circular leaves (up to 1cm across) that are hairy – 'all whiskery like a bee's leg' as a Connemara man described them to Robert Lloyd Praeger.⁶ The 'hairs' are tentacles that secrete sticky, digestive juices as in the Butterwort, but they are also extraordinarily responsive to animal substances, closing in around the prey till the leaf is like a shut fist.

Praeger observed that Sundews seemed to be more efficient hunters than the Butterworts, with their leaves showing plenty of trapped insects, not only little ones, but sometimes a small dragonfly or even a wasp.⁶

Like some of the other flowers mentioned earlier, it is well worth the effort



The more unusual Oblong-leaved Sundew is found mainly in the west, as in this example from the Poisoned Glen, Co Donegal.



5 minute interview

Colin Gibbon – climber, outdoor enthusiast

Colin Gibbon is an avid climber and outdoor enthusiast. He is the head of Shielbaggan Outdoor Education Centre in New Ross, Co Wexford, and he is also a member of BOS (Bord Oiliúint Sléibhe).

What did you do for your last holiday?

Two weeks skiing in Chamonix

Where is your next holiday to be?

Family holiday to the Scilly Isles

If you could climb any mountain what would it be?

Salathe wall on El Capitan

Why do you love walking in the Irish hills?

Great vistas, because there are no trees

Where is your favourite place to walk in Ireland?

Hook Head or Mweelrea

Where is your favourite place outside of Ireland?

Acadia National Park, Maine

What is your favourite piece of outdoor equipment?

Waterproof Canon camera

What is your favourite hill food?

Malt loaf

Have you ever been lost?

Oh yeah!

Have you ever been scared in the mountains?

Yes. When exposed to a savage rockfall in the Dru Couloir, Chamonix

What does adventure mean to you?

When you can't just say 'I've had enough' and go home

Water bottle or bladder system?

Water bottle. I have passed a certain age

Frosties or muesli?

Neither

Beer or lager?

Lager

Who do you most admire in the outdoor world?

Ranulph Fiennes. Because anything is possible

Who has inspired you most in the outdoor world?

Robert Park – a teacher in school who got me into the outdoors

What is the greatest threat to walking and climbing in Ireland?

People with the unshakable belief that it is okay to walk a dog anywhere

of getting down low, and getting your knees wet, to have a good look at this fascinating plant. A hand lens, or even the magnifying lens on a compass, will bring out its vivid colours and stunning detail. The glistening droplet at the end of each tentacle was mistaken for dew and early observers assumed that this plant, unlike almost all others, was capable of retaining its dew in full sunlight. So the Sundew got its name, and a reputation for magical properties.¹

Irish folklore records show Sundew's reputation as a cure for asthma and whooping cough.⁴ Under its Latin name, *Drosera*, it is also a commonly used homeopathic remedy for a dry cough.

There are two less common Sundew species found mainly in the west of Ireland: Oblong-leaved Sundew (*Drosera intermedia*) and the larger Great Sundew (*Drosera anglica*), both of which have oblong leaves.

Find out more

In the same way that the Irish mountains, while not the highest in the world, are rich in their scenic quality, the flowering plants that grow on our hills, while mainly small, are amongst the most beautiful we have. Many have also made ingenious adaptations to cope with life in harsh and nutrient-poor environments.

Having a little knowledge about the plants we see will add to the joy of a day on the hills. There's no better time to share this information with others than over the summer while these plants are in flower.

This article has covered a few flowers you are likely to come across. For those who would like to learn more, there are some excellent online guides to Irish wildflowers, most notably Zoë Devlin's www.wildflowersofireland.net and Jenny Seawright's www.irishwildflowers.ie.

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References

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