

Plumpton and East Chiltington Wildlife Group

Hawthorn - The May Tree

In Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, the narrator recalls, amongst many other things, his encounters as a child in the French countryside with blossoming hawthorn:

I found the whole path throbbing with the fragrance of hawthorn-blossom. The hedge resembled a series of chapels, whose walls were no longer visible under the mountains of flowers that were heaped upon their altars.

Proust's other recollections include a swooning description of its 'bitter-sweet fragrance of almonds' but the above passage captures possibly the best, if rather prosaic, definition of hawthorn, a blossoming hedge tree. Hawthorn is a tough cookie. It is long-living, can thrive on thin chalk soil and tolerate dense shade. Despite being overlooked in favour of taller and more glamorous neighbours, its prickly hedge ubiquity makes it probably the commonest tree in Sussex.

There are two, very similar, Hawthorn species in Sussex. The Midland thorn (*Crataegus laevigata*) is a tree of ancient hedgerow and woodland edges on stiff clay. It tends to flower one-two weeks earlier than its Common relative with pinky-white flowers that are not as sweet-smelling. It has darker haws with two seeds in each fruit and its less-lobed leaves are generally a darker, glossier green. The Common thorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) has more deeply lobed leaves. The white, or occasionally pink, flowers have one style and consequently the haws produce only one seed. It is more highly scented.

Hawthorn blossom usually arrives in late spring from May through the early June but is weather dependent and its timing and quantity can give rise to all kinds of forecasts as to subsequent summer weather and the harshness of winter. It is also subject to other folklore beliefs. Despite its beauty it is regarded as bad luck to bring hawthorn blossom into the house as it would bring only illness and misfortune to do so. Its distinctive scent was thought to resemble that of rotting corpses, not as spooky as it sounds as this has been identified as trimethylamine which is the chemical produced by decaying human bodies. Thorn trees longevity has given rise to legends such as that of the twice-flowering Glastonbury Thorn and of one of the oldest hawthorns in England, the 'Witch of Hethel' in Norfolk.

Left to its own devices a hawthorn tree can grow to a height of about 10m. They have a slim trunk, round crown and will withstand the rigours of an exposed site. However the utility of hawthorn is not as a timber tree. It is tough, dense and thorny - ideal hedging material. Even the origins of its name, from the Old English *haga*, shares Germanic roots with the *hecg/hegge* - hedge. Hawthorn hedges contributed to the 'enclosing' of Britain with millions of acres of open land delineated into familiar field grids from the late eighteenth century onwards.

Hedgerows are an essential habitat and refuge for a myriad of species, provide shelter and prevent soil erosion. Long-established hedges have the greatest value and none more so than Hawthorn. Hedgerows have been identified as a priority habitat for conservation action within England's Biodiversity 2020 targets. This is an

attempt to redress the stark fact that, due to a variety of factors, hedge removal exceeded hedge planting from WW2 onwards.

Hawthorn hedges are wildlife havens and a beautiful harbinger of summer. So this May, be like Marcel, get out there and admire them:

I promised that when I grew up I would never copy the foolish example of other men, but that even in Paris on fine spring days, instead of paying calls and listening to silly talk, I would set off for the country to see the first hawthorn-trees in bloom.

For more information:

hedgelinek.uk

National Hedgelaying Society

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