

# Promising signs of spring



A quintet of wild flowers spells the promise of spring for me: primrose *Primula vulgaris*, lesser celandine *Ranunculus ficaria*, barren strawberry *Potentilla sterilis*, wood anemone *Anemone nemorosa* and violets *Viola spp.* There is a south-facing bank along the Greensand Way between Plumpton and Streat where they seem to bloom earlier than elsewhere in the parish. While the flowers are most abundant in March and April, they can all flower earlier in good weather. This year, on 3rd January I saw primroses and lesser celandines in flower.

The primrose – prima rosa or the first rose of spring – is the flower most associated with Easter, being used to decorate churches in the past during the festival. There is an official Primrose Day on 19th April, when primroses are used to adorn Benjamin Disraeli's statue in Parliament Square and his grave at Hughenden in Buckinghamshire. The date is the anniversary of the politician's death and primroses were his favourite flower. As well as being picked to make spring posies, primroses were used by mediaeval herbalists to cure all manner of ills, from 'frenzie' to the King's Evil (scrofula – swelling caused by infection of the lymph nodes in the neck and also said to be curable by a king's touch). Its dried roots contain saponin and, as senegar root, they are used as an expectorant in modern medicine. In the past its petals were used to flavour drinks and preserves. Crystallised primrose petals are pretty on Mary Berry's Simnel cake (recipe available on the internet).

Lesser celandine's starry, shiny, golden flowers close in dull weather. One of its local names is pilewort, which comes from the belief of early herbalists that it was a remedy for piles because the little tubers on its roots resembled haemorrhoids. Indeed it has been used successfully to treat this condition. The fresh tubers were also once applied to warts. Its root tubers make this a troublesome plant if it gets into damp garden borders so it is not usually welcome there.

Barren strawberry is noticeable even before it flowers because of its rather blue-green leaves. I have found it flowering under snow as early as February but its pretty white flowers lose their petals at the slightest touch.

Wood anemones are usually in flower in many of our parish woodlands by March. They tend to dominate the damper ground, whereas bluebells, which often grow in the same woods, prefer a rather drier soil. They are indicators of ancient woodland and are said to seldom have fertile seeds so they depend on spreading by the root structure, perhaps only by no more than six feet in 100 years. So when you see them in pastures and hedges, as you sometimes do locally, it is a sure sign that the hedges are old and the pastures have not been ploughed in recent times. Like the lesser celandine, it opens its flowers fully only in sunshine.

The violets characteristic of spring are the early dog violet *Viola reichenbachiana*, the common dog violet *Viola riviniana* and the sweet violet *Viola odorata*. The early dog violet is an ancient woodland indicator and is in bloom in March, while the common dog violet flowers later, from April to June. Both these are unscented, unlike the sweet violet, which grows in rather more open habitats as well as woods and can be found in flower as early as February. It has been used in the making of perfume since the time of Classical Greece. The scent is strong but can be fleeting because one of its constituent chemicals, ionine, has the ability to deaden temporarily the smell receptors that detect it. In mediaeval Britain sweet violets were one of the strewing herbs and today they have a role in modern herbal medicine, especially in the treatment of coughs, bronchitis and rheumatic complaints.

These are the very early species – those that give promise of warmer weather. Many other spring flowers bloom en masse once spring has really arrived – lady's-smock or cuckoo flower *Cardamine pratensis*, bluebells *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* and ramsons *Allium ursinum*. Some, such as dandelion, sow thistle, red and white dead nettles and daisies, hang on from the previous year or can be found in bloom as occasional specimens more or less all year round – I counted 13 of that kind, including in late December.

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