Weed or not?

As a regular volunteer at our local organic farm, Ashurst Organics, I have become very familiar with the weeds in their fields. Plants such as Corn Spurrey and Field Woundwort, which have decreased greatly in many parts of the UK, are present in large numbers at Ashurst. The fields either side of the footpath to the college were meadows when Pete and Collette Haynes took over the farm in 1994 but the previous owners, Alec and Horace White, told them that the area had been cultivated in the past (probably during the Second World War and the push for more home-produced food). Long-buried weed seeds must have been brought to the surface when Pete and Collette ploughed the meadows, and thriving populations of both Corn Spurrey and Field Woundwort are now re-established.

Both Corn Spurrey and Field Woundwort are 'archaeophytes', plants introduced to the UK long ago. Seeds of both species have been found in Roman deposits - perhaps they were brought in by early immigrant farmers, or by supply wagons transporting food for the Roman troops. Growing close to the route of the Sussex Greensand Way, the Roman road between Henfield and Barcombe Mills, and the Roman Villa on Plumpton College land, it is tempting to imagine that the plants at Ashurst are the direct descendants of seeds spilt by supply wagons travelling along the ridge.

They are both attractive little plants; Corn Spurrey has white, star-like flowers and delicate whorls of thread-like leaves, whilst Field Woundwort, a member of the mint family, has tiny pinkish-mauve flowers. Both are widely known from early botanical records, but have declined significantly to the extent that Corn Spurrey is now listed as 'Vulnerable', or facing a high risk of extinction, and Field Woundwort as Near Threatened, or close to meeting the criteria for a Vulnerable listing, on the UK's Red List of Vascular Plant Species. For both plants, their decline reflects agricultural intensification, as herbicides and nitrogen became standard tools of arable farmers.

The Dictionary of Plant Lore lists alternative common names for Corn Spurrey as Poverty Weed, Beggar Weed, Pickpocket and Farmer's Ruin, reflecting how it was widely known as a rampant weed that would reduce yields and profits. Another old common name, Meal Plant, suggests a different story, and there are records of it being grown as a fodder plant. Corn Spurrey is a plant of relatively acid, bare and

gravelly soil, conditions in which few plants thrive. The seeds are shed in the Autumn, and quickly germinate, providing valuable winter food for fattening cattle. It is also said to be particularly liked by chickens.

A weed is often defined as a plant growing where we do not want it. The case of Corn Spurrey nicely illustrates how a plant can be unwanted in certain situations, and deserve to be called a weed, yet valued in other circumstances. Many old cornfield weeds, such as Common Poppy, Corn Marigold, Cornflower and Corn Cockle have now returned to favour as components of the popular 'Cornfield Annuals' seed mixtures of that we sow in our gardens to provide colour and attract bees and butterflies. Weeds - and not just the particularly attractive ones like Cow Parsley, Meadow Cranesbill and Ragged Robin - have even been grown for show gardens at the Chelsea Flower Show. The 2017 Gold Medal-winning World Horse Welfare garden included docks and dandelions.

Dandelion is perhaps the best example of a weed that is both loved and loathed. The RHS, no less, concedes that while dandelions are "troublesome in lawns", they have many herbal uses and are an excellent early source of nectar for pollinators. Dandelion wine, preferably made from flower heads picked on St Georges Day, is claimed to promote long life. Dandelion leaves, high in iron, add a bitter touch to a mixed salad, whilst the roots provide a red dye or, roasted, a coffee substitute.

There is much folk lore associated with dandelions. We are told as children that picking dandelions will cause us to wet the bed, and the plant does indeed have diuretic qualities. Children also learn to blow on a dandelion clock to tell the time or to find out at what age they will marry or how many children they will have.

Researchers have found that a single dandelion flower head produces more nectar than any of the species typically included in 'pollinator-friendly' seed mixes. Most importantly, dandelions start flowering early in the year, when there are few other nectar sources for honey, bumble and solitary bees. Dandelions have other wildlife benefits – they are one of the preferred caterpillar food plant for the Garden Tiger moth, and their seeds are eaten by Goldfinches and House Sparrows.

Rather than reaching for the trowel or weed killer, why not enjoy the dandelions in your garden.