

Nature note: berried alive

I've never seen the hawthorn bushes so laden with berries as this year. If you walk along the twin banks you'll see the lines of ancient hawthorns stippled in scarlet like a pointilliste painting. The haw of the hawthorn is the red oval cup, technically called a pome (not to be confused with the acronym P.O.M.E. 'Prisoner of Mother England', originally used of inmates deported to Australia – just in case you're doing any pub quizzes). The hawthorn belongs, somewhat surprisingly, to the large rose family, which also includes rowan, blackthorn, damson, apple and cherry, as well of course the rose itself, all of which have similar pomes encasing their seeds. The word 'haw' comes from the old-English *haga-berige*, meaning hedge-berry, and the trees are an ancient part of our landscapes.

There are more references to hawthorns in the Anglo-Saxon charters than to any other tree and hawthorns are also the trees most often encoded in English place-names.

But it wasn't until the parliamentary Enclosures of the 18th and 19th centuries, when some 200,000 miles of these 'quick-thorns' were planted, that they marked the rectilinear geometry of our field boundaries in such abundance.

In spring, of course, this is the May tree (the only tree that shares its name with a month), and last spring was notable for the billowing clouds of white blossom that graced our hedgerows everywhere. I met a lady on a walk recently who asked me if I believed the old country saying that a heavy berry crop presages a hard winter. In fact, I fancy that the causation works the other way around, and that the foaming bridal display in spring is now being realised in this wonderful, winter fruitfulness. I doubt the hawthorn can make long-range weather forecasts any better than the BBC can ...



Laurie Forsyth

Beautiful hawthorn berries

Any tree as ancient and charismatic as the hawthorn is bound to present itself today not just as a biological species but also as a cultural icon, trailing a comet's tail of myth, fable and folklore. The hawthorn's red berries, like those of the holly, speak of dark rites involving blood and sacrifice. But they can be positive omens, too: Joseph of Arimathea, leaving Jerusalem after the crucifixion, is supposed to have travelled to Britain and struck his staff into the ground at Glastonbury, whence it burst into a sacred thorn tree that has for centuries flowered in the nativity season; and every Christmas a sprig from its descendants is still sent to the Queen as a symbol of renewal. And these same berries will provide a rich larder for all the winter thrushes – redwings, fieldfares and blackbirds – migrating here from northern Europe.

Jeremy Mynott

Heritage Garden

Now we are into January, the cutting down and tidying up is finished and the climbing roses have been severely pruned for the first time and trained round the upright posts of the pergola.

All that is left is to spread the compost as far as it will go. Our three compost bins are a simple construction of pallets. One contains this year's garden leaves and cuttings, the second is waiting for the contents to be turned over into it and the third has the well-rotted stuff that was started 18 months ago. Ideally it should be left for 2 years but we find that by turning it half way through, it is usually ready for the following winter.

Ours looks rather good this year. Adrian Bell, the wonderful Suffolk farming writer of the 50s, described the ploughed soil as it turned over as looking like cake. I think our this year's compost looks like a rich fruit cake!

Miggie Wyllie



Contributed

Compost ready for spreading