BUSTLE & SEW
A COUNTRY YEAR

A Bustle & Sew Publication

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Hello, and welcome to this almanac that accompanies the Wheel of the Year embroidery project.

It was super-hard to decide what to put in and what to leave out each month, and inevitably more has been omitted than I have been able to include. I thought that perhaps you might like to know a little more about my choices. Also between these covers I have tried to give you a flavour of our English country year as the seasons change around us here on the Mendip Hills in Somerset, England.

This has been such a wonderfully enjoyable project for me, celebrating life around me as the year waxes and wanes and the months progress from spring to summer, autumn and winter then round again, a true circle of the year. T\

he study of these seasonal changes in plants and animals from year to year, such as flowering of plants, emergence of insects and migration of birds is known as phenology - nature's own calendar and I hope you enjoy stitching your own wheel of the year project.

Very best wishes

Helen xx

SPRING

O, to be in England
Now that April 's there,
And whoever wakes in England
Sees, some morning, unaware,
That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough
In England—now!

R Browning

March

March is a blustery month, a month of dancing daffodils - one of my most successful projects here at Station House has been the planting of a multitude of bulbs on the grassy bank that leads up to our garden. It felt like a leap of faith on a dreary October afternoon as the autumn leaves were falling, but one that paid off as their cheery golden flowers brighten even the dullest day. And of course I had to include those mad March hares! I used often to see them when I lived in Devon on the road down to an old barn by the sea. And now, if I'm very lucky, I can sometimes spot hares from my bedroom window before the trees come into leaf and the view is obscured.

In March the days have grown perceptibly longer, the skies are brighter and we can see the beginnings of a light green - patchy at first - haze of buds on trees and long hedgerows that tell us spring really is on the way. Everywhere we look there are signs of new growth as the banks and hedgerows begin to come to life again with spring flowers and busy nesting birds. In the garden too, there's more to look at, and of course the flower of the month is the daffodil, whose cheerful yellow blooms can be seen in gardens, parks and along roadside verges across the country.

The daffodils in the Lake District that inspired Wordsworth to write his famous verse "I wondered, lonely as a cloud" would have been the wild variety growing as they were beside the lake beneath the trees. Whether or not you are lucky enough to spot some of the delicate wild variety, or if you've planted some of the larger and sturdier hybrids in your garden, the sight of their yellow flowers blowing in the breeze or brightening up a grey day is perhaps the most potent image of spring in this country.

Once widely spread across the country the native daffodil isn't nearly as common as it once was, but clumps can still be found across the western part of the country. It was affectionately known as the "daffydowndilly." If you are in Cornwall then look out for clumps of unusual daffodils flowering oddly and in isolation along the hedgerows. These may well be the remains of heritage varieties, once the mainstay of the Cornish flower industry, but dumped along road edges during WW2 when the flower fields were given over to food production.

Whilst we regard March as the first month of spring, astronomically it straddles the seasons as the first twenty days leading up to the equinox belong to winter. In many respects it's a month of preparation and anticipation; for farmers it is the sowing season and in the Christian Church the month is largely dominated by the Lenten fast and the approach of Easter.

For many birds and animals March is the beginning of their breeding season. .The gambolling, leaping, boxing and chasing antics of hares at this time of the year gave rise to the expression "Mad as a March Hare" But this behaviour is just part of their mating rituals and isn't solely confined to March as their breeding season extends from January to October. You're more likely to spot hares behaving in this way in early spring however, before the crops and hay meadows grow tall enough to screen them from view. Early morning and evening are the best times to go looking for hares as this is when they're at their most active

By the middle of the month the hedgerows around our house are beginning to bloom, decked with first blackthorn blossom (which often heralds a cold snap), followed by hawthorn, and, later in the season, wild honeysuckles and dog roses. At the base of the hedges you can see fresh green growth - the bright green of young nettle tips is particularly prominent, though you will also see violets, primroses and again, later in the season, bluebells will begin to appear. Lambs are of course the other heart-lifting symbol of spring. They can be seen gambolling in fields across the country, whilst the very first butterflies of the year are beginning to appear.

When Day equals Night ....

March brings a moment of harmony - a time of perfect balance when day and night are of equal length - the time of the Spring, or Vernal Equinox. This moment marks the transition between winter and spring, the time when the new season begins as we move inexorably towards the warmer days and shorter nights of the summer months ahead.

The equinox falls on or about 21 March each year , when the sun passes over the equator from south to north. In the winter the tilt of the earth's axis brings the northern hemisphere further from the sun, which makes the sun's heat weaker and the days shorter. Then as spring progresses, the North Pole gradually begins to point towards the sun, which day on day rises ever higher in the sky. This makes the days longer, temperatures begin to rise and summer will soon be here!

April

April heralds the beginning of the warmer months. The apple trees are in full blossom now, pinks, whites and creams, and the chickens are laying well. More often than not Easter falls this month and there will be celebrations, egg hunts, bunnies and bunting of course!

April brings the start of the growing season here in the west of England, though keen gardeners must still be cautious as a late frost may still threaten tender young plants.

The weather in April has always been important to the farmer, hence such saying as “April wet good wheat” and “April and May are the keys to the year.” Better known perhaps is the old proverb “April showers bring forth May flowers” and this is the magic of April - celandines and primroses, violets and dandelions, lady’s smock wild strawberries and shy violets all appear like old friends. Bare winter skeletons of trees and hedgerows begin to flush green once more, leaving the cold of winter behind. Pale green light filters through translucent young leaves and, as the month progresses, the countryside is transformed from its winter bleakness with the promise of warmth and growth, of new life and summer on the way.

Here in the UK the flush of spring moves northwards up the length of the land, at walking pace - from the Isles of Scilly to Shetland But even at the end of May there are places in northern Britain still waiting to shake off their long, hard winter. A widespread traditional saying, reported from across the British Isles since at least the mid-sixteenth century, maintains that March borrowed three days from April; and so the last three days in March are called the “Borrowed Days” or “Borrowing Days.” There is a lot of confusion however about the result of this borrowing - surely it must mean that the last three days in March will be warmer and milder than they should be at this time of year and for three days in April to be unseasonably cold. But the weather at this time of year is so changeable anyway that goodness knows what’s really going on!

Out in the open countryside, rising temperatures and lengthening days bring a cloud of blackthorn blossom. This large shrub, almost a tree in fact, is native to our islands. It forms thorny thickets that provide other plants with shelter from browsing and grazing animals, and secure nesting sites for many birds. Blackthorn flowers early when easterly winds can still bring severe weather. Traditionally known as “blackthorn winters” these sudden cold snaps remind us that April can indeed be a fickle month. The old saying “Cast ne’er a clout till May is out” refers not to the month of May, but to the blossoms of the May tree, known also as hawthorn. When its white flowers adorn our hedgerows then spring is finally here to stay.

April brings the bursting open of buds to reveal vivid green spring leaves. This greening of the countryside is one of the joys of living in a temperate part of the world where the seasons are so distinct. We are past the spring equinox now, and here in Britain the green flush of spring moves northwards up the length of the land at roughly a walking pace, from the Isles of Scilly in the south to Shetland in the far north.In our gardens, hedgerows and woodlands, fresh flowers are opening almost daily; yellow cowslips bloom on grassy banks, and in shady woodland spots you can see the green spires of bluebell leaves thrusting up through the leaf litter left from the previous autumn, and, by the end of the month, these will bloom in great sheets of brilliant bluebells that will carpet our woodland floors. So popular is this sight that people will travel miles to see the most famous bluebell woods.

On warm days dandelion clocks are already dispersing their seeds in puffs of silver on the spring breezes while the creamy blossom of fruit trees along hedgerows and in orchards is another lovely April sight. In fruit orchards you may see bullfinches feeding on the flower buds, easily distinguishable from other finches by their rosy pink breast feathers.

Free from Mud and Bloom : Wild Garlic Butter

May

In May the whole world seems to explode into bloom. It is the month of wildflowers that froth along the railway lines, smother the grassy verges and cascade down the embankments. It's also the time of swallows returning en masse from their winter haunts. We have three swallow nesting boxes that have been in position for two years - and for two years have been completely ignored. Perhaps this will be the year that we get lucky and find ourselves giving a home to a swallow family at last!

The coming of May has always been a time for celebration. If we welcome the warm weather now, with all the comfort of our centrally heated homes and thermal clothing to keep us snug during the winter months, then think how much more eagerly the month was welcomed when the only source of heating in a cottage would have been an open fire, and possibly a cooking range, around which drenched heavy woollen clothing and leather boots had to be dried out.

The first of the month is of course, May Day - traditionally a time for setting out to gather greenery and flowers, especially May blossom from the hawthorn tree. Known as "bringing in the May" the custom was associated with a lot of rather saucy goings-on between all the lads and lasses who seized the excuse to vanish into the woods.

The focal point of British May Day festivities was, and still is, the Maypole - a tall pole decorated with flowers at its top and often painted with brightly coloured stripes. There are ribbons too, for each dance to grasp and create pretty coloured patterns by weaving in and out of each other as they dance around the pole.

Hawthorn, also known as the May tree, comes into blossom at this time of year, marking the beginning of the brightest and warmest season of the year. Hawthorn has long been associated with the May Day festivities - the rhyme "here we go gathering nuts in May" originally derives from "knots" of May, ie sprigs of hawthorn blossom. In Ireland it's often called whitethorn due to its creamy white flowers and the writer H.E. Bates referred to the blossom most poetically as "the risen cream of all the milkiness of May time".

Bluebells are a commonplace sight across most of the UK in late April and early May, but globally these flowers are fairly scarce with a restricted range in those countries that border Europe's Atlantic seaboard: north-west Spain, France, the Low Countries, Ireland and of course ourselves. Indeed our mild, damp climate supports more than half the total world population of this beautiful intense blue flower. Bluebells are a classic indicator species of ancient woodland, and have attracted a wide range of folk names, including fairy bells, bellflower, wild hyacinth and fairy thimble. The English bluebell is under threat though from hybridisation with a non-native species, the Spanish bluebell. This is a popular garden flower that has spread into the wild where it crossbreeds with our native bluebells. These hybrids have taller, straighter stems and the flowers don't droop in the same way as those of the native variety. They also have a less powerful scent.

Many birds are now coaxing their broods out of the nest and into the world - and it's fun to watch them trying out their wings with wobbly test flights from bush to bush, zig-zagging across the garden. They still can't feed themselves though and their poor harassed parents have to work even harder to feed their scattered offspring until they finally become self-sufficient - when if the conditions are right, the parents may raise a second or even third brood of chicks during the summer months.

It's impossible to ignore the birds this month, even supposing you wanted to, as by May the dawn chorus is at its peak with our resident birds joined by the migrants returning from their wintering grounds. Birds sing to defend their territory and to attract a mate. They put most effort into singing before the daylight fully arrives because the sound of birdsong will travel further on the still, quiet air and also because it isn't light enough yet for them to begin their daily search for food.

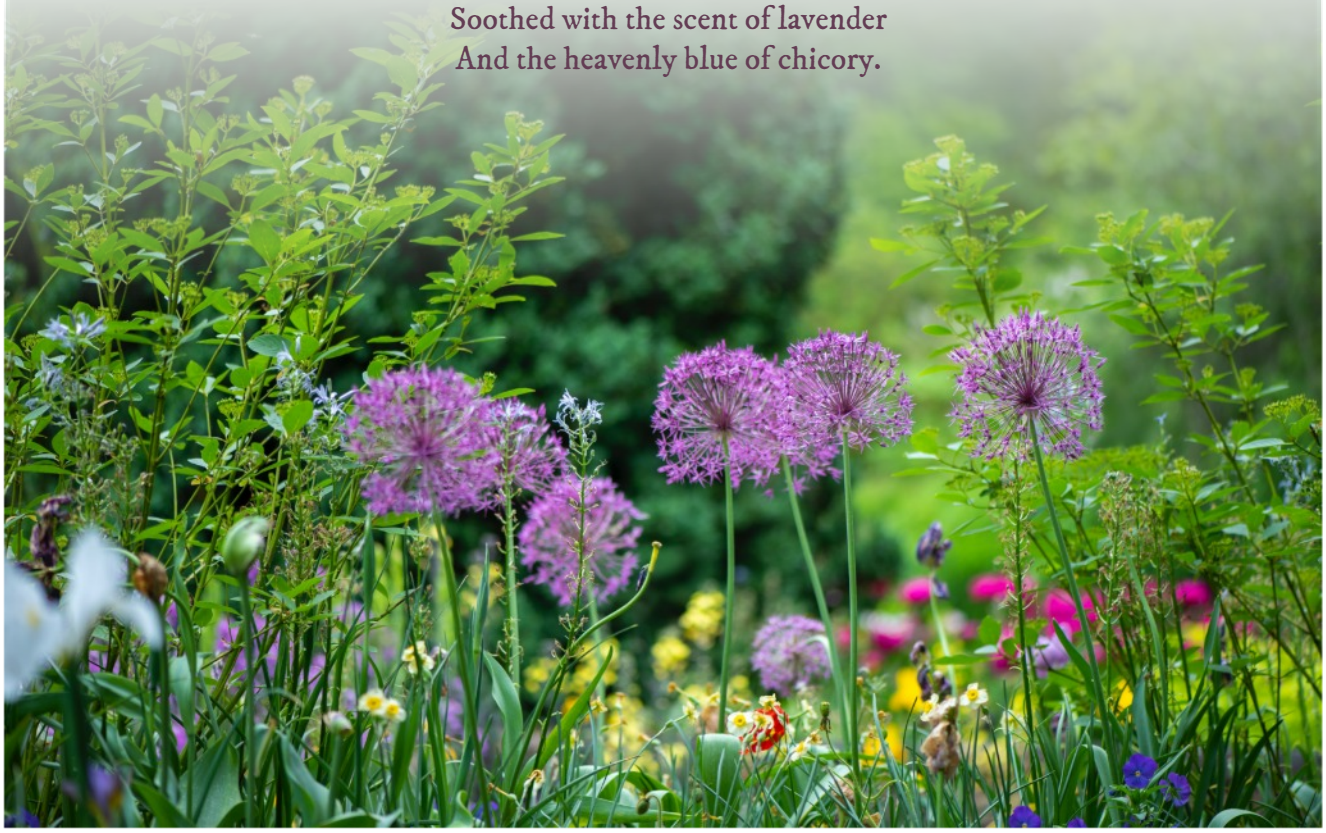
Elizabethan Herb Song

Plant me a garden to heal the body
Betony, yarrow and daisies to mend
Sage for the blood and comfrey for bones
Foxglove and hyssop the sick to tend.

Chorus
Tansy, rosemary, rue and thyme
Bring back the lover who once was mine
I will give him the sweet basil tree
Then he will always belong to me.

Plant me a garden to heal the heart,
Balm for joy, and the sweet violet
Cowslips, pansies and chamomile
To ease the pain I want to forget.

Plant me a garden to heal the soul,
A garden of peace and tranquility,
Soothed with the scent of lavender
And the heavenly blue of chicory.




SUMMER
”Summer afternoon—summer afternoon; to me those have always been the two most beautiful words in the English language.” — Henry James

June

By June the first exuberance of spring is behind us, wild or briar roses stud the hedgerows with pink blooms and the animals have settled down to raise their young. Butterflies appear in the garden as we are always careful to include those flowers they love. A colony of badgers have made their home near us, digging their sett in some abandoned ground adjacent to the engine sheds and on warm nights it's possible to see them and their cubs as they bustle around the entrance to their home.

This month is named after Juno, the wife of the Roman king of the gods, Jupiter - and perhaps after all it is the queen of the months. The hedgerows are smothered in wild roses, elderflowers, honeysuckle and guelder rose, and along the banks beneath there are countless wild flowers : clover, vetches, moon daisies, grasses of all kinds, meadowsweet with its heady scent - all creating a bonanza for bees who are out and about the whole day long collecting pollen and nectar. However, in spite of this, as Vita Sackville West wrote a century ago in her poem "The Land"….

"Full summer comes; June brings the longest day. All country dwellers know the small despair of the year's summit…."

Though the year has turned already and, by the end of this month, the days will be shortening again, still winter is a very long way off and there's plenty of time to enjoy the summer days that lie ahead.

June is rich in weather lore because it's such an important time in the crops. "A leak in June brings harvest soon," and "a dripping June sets all in tune," are two old sayings. Certainly sudden and often torrential thunderstorms are typical of this month and superstition tells us that rain on the eighth foretells a wet harvest. But, whatever the weather, June is a busy month for the farmer.

Fruit is ripening on wild cherries now, and you will see a range of birds including pigeons, blackbirds and thrushes feasting on them. Small green sloes are appearing on blackthorn, promising the chance to make sloe gin in the autumn, and later this month the hedgerows will be festooned with the creamy flowers of travellers' joy entwined with dog roses and wild honeysuckle.

The more established the hedge and bank the more species of wild flowers can be spotted, though even recently established hedgerows and verges become spangled with wild flowers this month. Just as yellow, white and blue were the predominant colours of spring, so pink, cream and red fringe the roadsides in June.

The most common is perhaps cow parsley, whose massed flowers foam like breaking waves along the country lanes as cars sweep past. There are also ox-eye or moon daisies that bear single large flowers with white petals and a vivid yellow centres that delight passers by as their tall sturdy stems sway in the wake of commuters hurrying home to enjoy the long summer evenings.

Away from the city, across the countryside elder trees are coming into bloom, their profuse creamy-white flower heads unmissable. Both the flowers and the berries are good for making a variety of drinks such as wines and cordials, whilst elderflower fritters make a delicious snack. Ideally pick elderflowers for edible purposes on a warm dry day and don't take them from roadside trees as they will be polluted from by exhaust fumes. Deep in the sunlit woodlands you'll find foxgloves in flower, their tall spikes of purple blooms growing perhaps at the shady base of an old fallen tree and a few fields, perhaps those farmed organically or that haven't been sprayed this year, will be red with poppies.

The Beauty of Clouds

Clouds are beautiful and tranquil - and something we all, quite naturally, take for granted. But in this difficult times, cloud watching can be a peaceful activity that offers calm in a sometimes troubling world. But as well as looking at clouds, why not try learning a little about them?

There are four main types of cloud, although you'll often see more than one kind at once:

- Cirrus - indicators of fair weather, that look wispy and feathery
- Stratus - flat sheets of cloud that give us overcast or foggy days
- Nimbus clouds contain rain or snow and so these appear dark grey
- Cumulus are low lying and look like big fluffy cotton wool balls, unless they darken and deepen, forming cumulonimbus which can be the harbinger of a storm.

If you have a little time to spare, why not find a patch of grass, lie back and watch the clouds go by. Choose a warm summer's day when there are plenty of clouds in the sky. Use your imagination to find animals and other shapes and pictures in the clouds as they drift past.

July

July is the month for holidays, for ice cream and trips to the beach. Puffins can be seen around the UK coastline, while there are lighthouses to visit - the one I have stitched is inspired by the lighthouse at Plymouth named Smeaton's Tower.

It's open to the public if you're ever down that way and the views across the Sound are amazing!

July brings high, high summer - it's the most summer it will ever be in this country. Our gardens are alive with the buzz of bees and flutter of butterflies whilst the drone of lawnmowers can be heard in the distance - and it's tempting to believe that summer will never end. But daylight hours have peaked now and during the course of the month the day length will decrease (in London) by one hour and six minutes, to 15 hours and 27 minutes.

The countryside is transformed once again this month as crops begin to ripen and fields turn slowly from green to gold. Soft fruits, such as strawberries, raspberries and blackcurrants are available in abundance - on garden bushes, in shops and supermarkets and at pick your own fruit farms, and enthusiastic jam makers can sometimes be spotted slaving over their hot preserving pans late into the evening to make the most of this summer bounty.

July brings the beginning of the holiday season and though it's one of the hottest months of the year, weather lore seems to be preoccupied with rain - most famously on St Swithin's Day which falls on the fifteenth of the month. I'm certain that everyone knows the folklore of this day, which falls on the fifteenth of the month - and in particular that it never ever comes true! If it rains on that day then we're not going to experience a forty day deluge and if it's sunny then we are by no means guaranteed a warm dry summer. But there is a small kernel of truth that may have inspired the legend, which is that summer weather patterns established by mid-July will often persist well into August.

When the sun does shine though, it can be very hot and on a country walk you may be joined by a most annoying plant that insists on hitching a lift on your clothing - goosegrass. With its hairy stems and sticky leaves that cling to clothing and to animal fur too, it's trying to disperse its seeds. It's called goosegrass because geese (and my chickens too!) love eating it. It used to be fed to goslings to fatten them up and buildup their immunity to disease.

In the countryside at the end of July, the corn fields are beginning to ripen and turn golden edged with blue scabious and purple knapweed, while the hedgerows bloom with willowherb, yarrow and other wild flowers. Having raised their young birds such as robins, thrushes and blackbirds are falling quiet and going into moult, while the first breathtaking blooming of roses in June has passed, there has been a lull and now the new buds of the second flowering are waiting to burst into new bloom.

Watering your garden can be a problem at this time of year, especially if it's a long dry summer and hosepipe bans are in force. One of the best ways to get around this problem is to purchase a water butt. This can then sit discreetly tucked away beneath the downpipe of a gutter giving you lovely fresh water for your garden - hopefully all year round.

Towards the end of the month the cornfields are nearly fully ripe and across the countryside the golden fields are edged with blue scabious and purple knapweed, whilst the hedgerows bloom with willowherb, yarrow and other wild flowers. Purple thistles are also blooming, and are much in demand by goldfinches which love their seeds.

Having raised their young, garden birds are ceasing to sing and are going into moult, but the chirping of the meadow cricket provides an evocative background sound for lazy summer afternoons, whilst on lakes and rivers you will see solemn processions of fluffy grey-brown cygnets paddling along behind their graceful and majestic parents. Summer is here and it seems for a few short weeks nature is on "pause" while we make the most of it.

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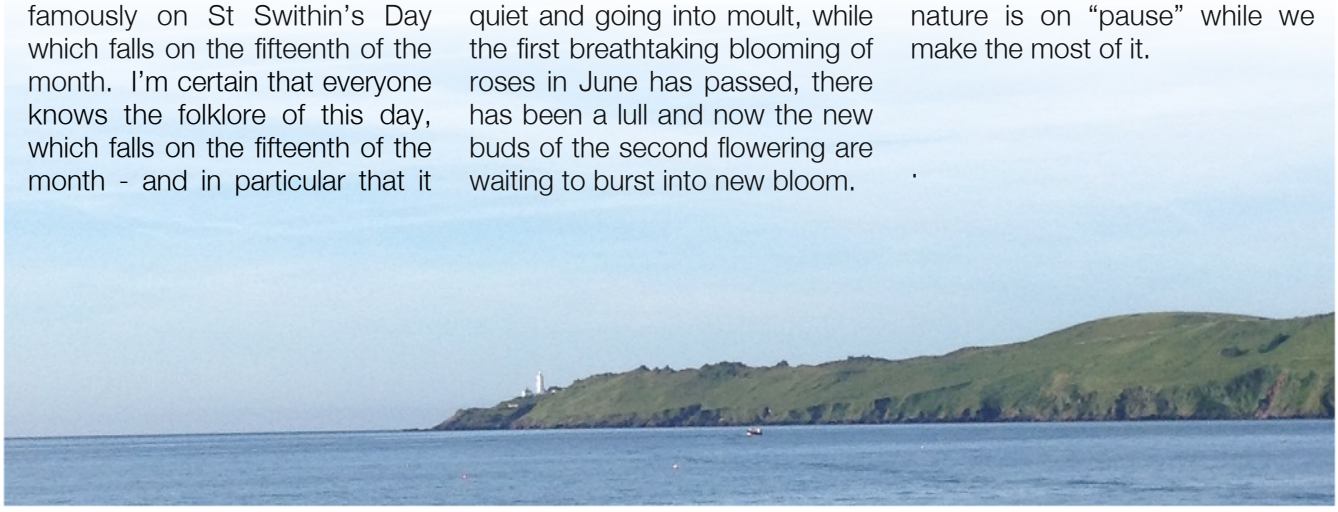


An Old Fashioned Holiday

In the heat of the summer, there is a familiar, tired air about our city streets as though, for a week or two, they seem to carry a multitude slightly out of step, for thousands are strangers which tread them in the casual, dawdling footsteps of holiday; whole thousands of their workaday families have forsaken them for the mainline termini where the "Holiday Specials" await, their engines pointing north, south, east or westwards to the sea.

Holiday time upon the beaches of Britain, beaches of all kinds, from the horizonless sand-flats of Norfolk to the rosy, rock-sheltered covers of Cornwall, Devon and western Wales. Wherever the tides run within touch of human habitation there come the holidaymakers to shake hands with the sea. Sometimes in crowds, sometimes in discriminating ones and twos to those wild and lonely parts of the coast where the big Atlantic bursts, chocking at the feet of the tall cliffs. Here are no donkey rides, concert parties, Punch and Judy shows - just the boiling of the surf, the wind among the dead-heads of the thrift, the calling of the kittiwakes in the spray.

C Gordon-Glover
Extract from "*Book of the Countryside*" 1953

August

When Florence was very young her mum and I took her to visit a sunflower field at a farm near us. I shall never forget the look of wonder in her eyes as she gazed across the sea of enormous golden flower heads all turned towards the sun. And of course now she and her brother, Freddie, love to grow their own sunflowers each year, marvelling at how a small stripy seed can develop into such a towering and impressive plant.

Now the trees are dark and dusty, heavy with foliage and the grass is beginning to die back in the heat of the summer,while the fruits and seeds of wild flowers begin to ripen across the countryside. Sparrows and finches are on the wing while thrushes and blackbirds are feeding on rowan berries in the hedgerows. The summer is nearing its end and the year will soon tilt slowly over into autumn and the new pleasures that season brings.

August is the month for fun, for holidays by the sea, barbecues with friends and family, festivals, carnivals and day trips to all kinds of interesting places. Across gardens and countryside everything is ripening all at once and there is a sense that summer is beginning to slip quietly from our grasp. The colours are turning from green to gold and in hot weather the grass looks parched and tired. Plants are no longer growing vigorously, rather their energies are put into ripening seeds and fruits.

All of this is a sign that summer is on the wane, and won't last forever, no matter how much we wish it could - so enjoy these golden days while they last - and they are now growing noticeably shorter - in London day length decreases over the month by 1 ¾ hours to 13 hours In the hedgerows the first elderberries and blackberries are ripening and trees such as rowan and yew carry red fruits. The tall graceful stems of cow parsley (or Queen Anne's lace), that frothed along the lanes in May are now a withered tangle topped by long black fruits. You may also spot the blue bloom of new sloe berries promising the chance to make sloe gin next month. Blackberries can be harvested from the end of this month, but don't succumb to the temptation to settle for easy pickings from roadside hedgerows as these will be contaminated with traffic fumes - as my mum used to tell me - the juiciest berries are always those right at the top - nearly out of reach! It's a great plan to take a walking stick with you on these expeditions to help pull down those topmost trusses of plump juicy fruit.

It was the Victorians who selected August as the customary month for the annual family holiday. This was traditionally the time for gathering the grain harvest, and almost everyone in the countryside was required to lend a hand, even children who could make themselves useful turning sheaves or scaring crows from the gleanings. So, when school attendance was made compulsory for every child up to the age of ten, following the General Education Acts, a summer break was established for the month of August and everyone took to the fields.

Disappointingly though, August often has less sunshine than either July or September, and can actually be quite wet, especially inland.

The traditional August Bank Holiday weekend, falling on the last Monday of the month, is in many ways the last gasp of summer before the schools return for the new academic year and we begin to look towards the autumn months. But for now, the motorways leading to seaside towns and resorts host the final traffic jam of the season. Cars, coaches and caravans throng the roads as the warm summer sunshine tempts people out for their last official break before Christmas.

Tastes of the Season: Edible Flowers

Here in the UK, the enjoyment of edible flowers is a relatively recent development - certainly in my childhood my parents would have been horrified to find flowers in their salads, firmly believing that they belonged in a vase on the dining room table. Today we're much more adventurous in our tastes and edible flowers are a tasty (and colourful) addition to the summer menu.

Edible flowers can be used to add colour, flavour and texture to both savoury and sweet dishes, as well as cordials, oils and butters. A wide range of annuals and perennial edible flowers can be grown in the garden from early spring to late autumn. But do be sure you've accurately identified what you're picking and eating - if in doubt don't eat! Be sure to pick younger flowers ad buds on dry mornings, before the sun becomes too strong so the colour and flavours will be intense. Use them immediately for best results or refrigerate in a plastic bag for a couple of days. Dried or frozen flowers are best used in infusions or cooked.

AUTUMN

"The falling leaves drift by the window
The autumn leaves of red and gold
I see your lips, the summer kisses
The sun-burned hands I used to hold

Since you went away the days grow long
And soon I'll hear old winter's song
But I miss you most of all my darling
When autumn leaves start to fall"

Song by Nat King Cole

September

September is a golden mellow kind of month, very often a continuation it seems, of summer. But all around there are signs that the year has turned again and autumn is only just around the corner. The wild roses are all gone now and the hedgerows are festooned with shiny red rosehips, the first leaves are beginning to fall and it's the season for fungi of all kinds, including that fairytale favourite the fly agaric.

September brings early morning mists and the first heavy dews sparkling in the mellow sunlight. Around us the colours of the countryside are changing again, there are berries in the hedgerows and some birds are preparing to migrate. But though autumn is approaching, summer will linger a little while yet so that this month we often enjoy the best of both worlds.

September is a time of change - the sun goes into its long decline, the meadows are left bare and the apples are falling from the trees. It's also a time to finish gathering the harvest for the winter, to ensure your log store is full and to dream of cosy evenings by the fire as the year rushes towards the festive season ahead.

The word "autumn" comes from the Latin autumnus and its use in the English language dates back to the fourteenth century. On this side of the Atlantic we prefer the term autumn, but in the US, fall is preferred. The latter appears in sixteenth century texts in the longer phrase "the fall of the leaf" but by the second half of the seventeenth century the shorter fall was certainly in common use.

Above all, September is the month of berries - bramble, rowan, hawthorn and spindle, to mention just a few; a hedgerow harvest that will provide valuable sustenance for hungry birds throughout the colder months ahead. And on those misty golden mornings, there are few sights more evocative of the onset of autumn than the early morning festoons of dew-drenched gossamer like spiders' webs draping the hedgerows and sparkling in the hazy light. There are still plants in flower though, hogweed, angelica and the glorious honeysuckle that winds its way far above our heads.

Elderberries have been ripening since August, handing in dense deep purple clusters on their claret-coloured stems, bringing colour and richness to the countryside. They are particularly rich in vitamin C and make dark wines, jams and jellies - good for warding off those pesky winter sniffles. Well into late autumn, the elder bushes are a larder for all kinds of birds who also enjoy their rich, succulent berries.

September brings the start of the apple season - did you know that there are more than two and a half thousand named varieties of British apple? It's a very good time to look for apple trees in the hedgerows too. Depending upon the tree, they may be a genuinely wild species or have grown from pips discarded by past travellers. Crab apples can also often be found in hedgerows - though they're unsuitable for eating, being small, sour and woody, they are high in pectin making them a great base for preserves and jellies.

In the New Forest, Hampshire, in the south of England the "pannage" or the "Common of Mast" season begins in September. The exact date depends upon when acorns begin to fall from the oak trees. That's when pigs, often from traditional breeds, are released to room freely through the forest hunting primarily for acorns, but beech nuts, chestnuts and crab apples are also much appreciated. This practice dates back many centuries to when some forest inhabitants, known as "commoners" claimed their right to graze pigs in the forest. It also helps the more famous forest residents as acorns are poisonous to cattle and the New Forest ponies too.

In the Woods....

The quantity of fungous growth this year is quite remarkable. The late heavy rain coming rather suddenly on the well-warmed earth has no doubt brought about their unusual size and abundance; in some woodland places one can hardly walk without stepping upon them. Many spots in the copse are brilliant with large groups of the scarlet-capped Fly Agaric (Amanita muscaria). It comes out of the ground looking like a dark scarlet ball, generally flecked with raised whitish spots; it quickly rises on its white stalk, the ball changing to a brilliant flat disc, six or seven inches across, and lasting several days in beauty.

But the most frequent fungus is the big brown Boletus, in size varying from a small bun to a dinner-plate. Some kinds are edible, but I have never been inclined to try them, being deterred by their coarse look and uninviting coat of slimy varnish. And why eat doubtful Boletus when one can have the delicious Chantarelle (Cantharellus cibarius), also now at its best? In colour and smell it is like a ripe apricot, perfectly wholesome, and, when rightly cooked, most delicate in flavour and texture. It should be looked for in cool hollows in oak woods; when once found and its good qualities appreciated, it will never again be neglected.

From: Wood and Garden
Gertrude Jekyll 1899

October

Halloween is much more widely celebrated now than it was in my own childhood. We had certainly never heard of trick or treating and the most fun we had (although it was indeed a lot of fun) was apple bobbing and other such games! Today there are pumpkins galore to be found on doorsteps, windowsills and other such places across the village and yes, there are bats here, not yet hibernating but fluttering along their flight path to the side of our house, over the greenhouse and up towards the horse chestnut trees whose leaves are golden now and thickly carpet the ground beneath.

By the end of this month the fields are harvested and laid bare, the last of the summer flowers have long since faded and fallen leaves form a thick carpet on the ground. In the Celtic calendar October 31 is celebrated as Samhain, meaning “the end of summer” and the beginning of the dark half of the year. Over the years sacred rituals of protection and propitiation marking the end of the summer months have slowly become infused with a sense of fear of the dark unknown and the supernatural at the approach of winter. It’s the twilight of the year, bringing dark magic and mystery along with the fading light and growing shadows.

There are some late fruits at this time of year that traditionally need to feel the frost, damsons, medlars and sloes in particular. Sloes, the blackthorn berry, should also be harvested for gin after the first frost of October, although these days, due to the warming climate, waiting for a frost in October may be fruitless.

Whether we enjoy a St Luke’s little summer or not the hedgerows are beautiful at this time of year. Early morning dew glistens on cobwebs and here and there a few wildflowers may still be found in bloom. Red fruits such as rowan berries, hips and haws glow among the hedgerows’ dying leaves, providing a rich food source for the birds. string or floating in a bowl of water.

October is the time when traditional hedge laying is carried out. This craft dates from the 1700’s and has the effect of filling in the gaps between hedgerow plants’ stems so that animals cannot push between them. First unwanted shoots are removed, then the remaining stems are cut partly through and bent over at a diagonal angle, after which stakes are driven in to hold the stems or pleachers in place. It all looks very stark when first cut, but the pleachers aren’t killed and will sprout bushy new growth in the spring.

Along the hedges fluffy seed heads of wild clematis festoon the fading leaves. In appreciation of its vanilla-scented summer flowers this plant was named “traveller’s joy in the days when people moved across the country following dirt tracks that hugged hedgerows, Today it is more commonly known as “old man’s beard” due to its profusion of shaggy heads, each comprising numerous plumed seeds. But, with the onset of the first autumn storms, the old man’s beard is torn from the hedgerows and cast into the wind.

In the leaf litter at the base of the hedge families of hedgehogs will be rummaging for the last of the autumn pickings in their quest to fatten up before the falling temperatures force them into hibernation. They need to reach a body weight of at least a pound before they can successfully hibernate, so at this time of year you may often spot late-born youngsters frantically foraging in broad daylight for the beetles, worms and slugs that seem so numerous on damp autumn days

This year’s spiders are now fully grown and at this time of the year their large circular webs seem to appear overnight, stretched over hedges and across garden paths, their fine strands catching in your hair each morning.

October

I've brought you nuts and hops;
And when the leaf drops, why the walnut drops.
Crack your first nut and light your first fire,
Roast your first chestnut crisp on the bar;
Make the logs sparkle, stir the blaze higher,
Logs are as cheery as sun or star,
Logs we can find wherever we are.
Spring one soft day will open the leaves,
Spring one bright day will lure back the flowers;
Never fancy my whistling wind grieves,
Never fancy I've tears in my showers:
Dance, night and days! and dance on, my hours!

Christina Rossetti

November

Throughout the autumn months the wild geese fly over our house - I think we must be on a migration highway. Activity peaks in early November, then dies away as the last stragglers leave on their long journeys to their winter feeding grounds. I have often joked that they must have a piece of string inside them that connects their wings to their "honkers" as every wingbeat they let out a loud "honk" that echoes through the air, attracting the attention of onlookers, including a lone fox who is going to be unlucky again if he should try his luck at my henhouse tonight.

November nights can be foggy as the smoke from bonfires - both of the garden and the Guy Fawkes variety - hangs on the damp autumn air. And now autumn slowly but surely begins to give way to winter but as the chilly weather begins to take hold there are still plenty of seasonal pleasures to anticipate, long crisp country walks, the pleasure of blazing log fires with the lingering scent of wood smoke on the breeze and hearty casseroles simmering in the oven. The countryside around us is turning increasingly brown as the stubble is ploughed under and the hedgerows and trees lose their last leaves to frost and wind. But even now there are still flashes of colour to be found.

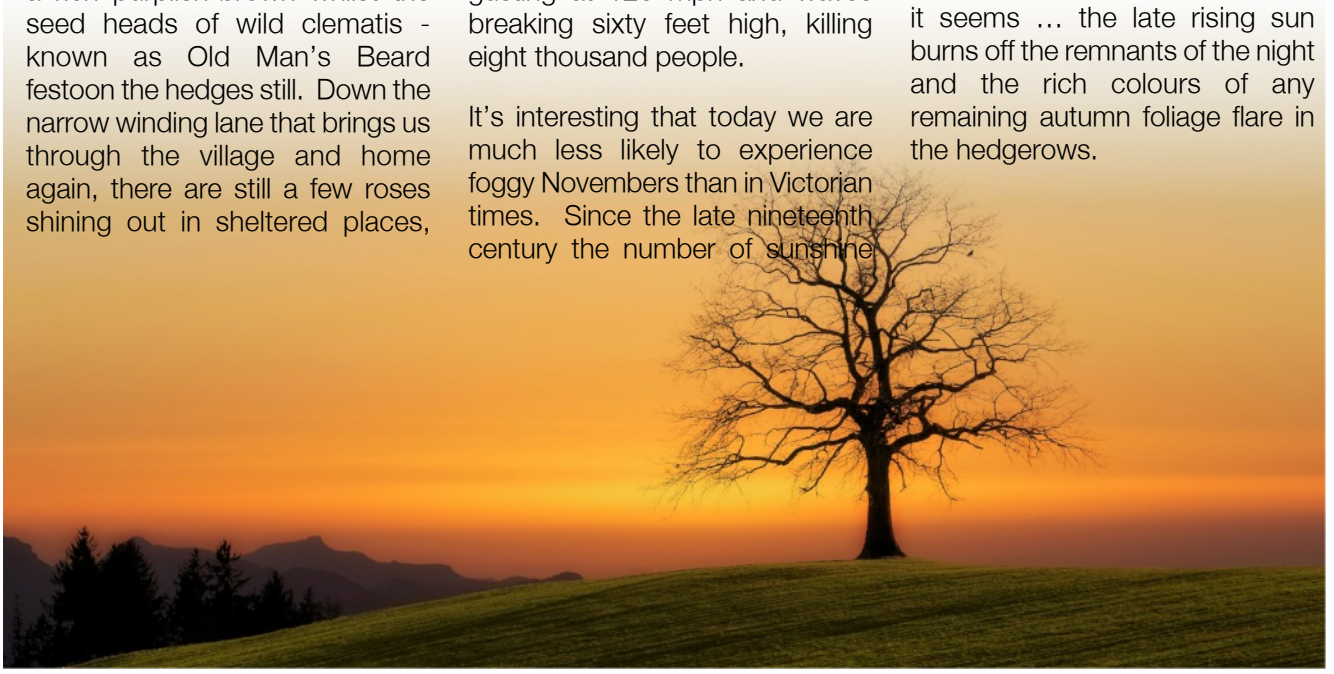
Look for late rose hips, purple hawthorn leaves with deep red haws nestled among them, and strings of shiny red woody nightshade berries strung along the bare branches. Bracken and bramble offer shades of gold and a rich purplish-brown whilst the seed heads of wild clematis - known as Old Man's Beard festoon the hedges still. Down the narrow winding lane that brings us through the village and home again, there are still a few roses shining out in sheltered places, and the lemon-yellow fireworks of winter jasmine have begun to burst out on house and cottage walls. The churchyard hollies are packed with colour, berries clustering amongst their dark green shiny leaves, for all the world like swarms of scarlet bees or ladybirds.

The Elizabethan and Jacobean writer Nicholas Breton's account of November notes that it is the season for hunting woodcock, pheasant and mallard and for the cook and comfit-maker to prepare for Christmas; it is also the time when butter and cheese rise in price, the nobility feast themselves while the "poore die through want of Charitie" and there is chilling cold and rain, and high winds. He also remarks on the high winds characteristic of this month - though these were never as bad as on 26 November 1703, when the Great Storm hit England. It has been estimated that this catastrophe was equivalent to a Category 3 hurricane, with winds gusting at 120 mph and waves breaking sixty feet high, killing eight thousand people.

It's interesting that today we are much less likely to experience foggy Novembers than in Victorian times. Since the late nineteenth century the number of sunshine hours in November has steadily increased, partly due to the decrease in the burning of carbon - and hence smog-forming - fuels, but also because the pattern of November winds has gradually shifted from a tendency for cloudy southerlies to more clear and cold northerlies.

November nights may still be foggy however, especially in the countryside, where the mixture of bonfire smoke and spent cordite hangs on the damp autumn air as we return from our village bonfire party. But they are just as likely to be crystal clear and the sky as high as the moon.

If I walk down to the end of our garden, as we live quite someway outside the village and there is no light pollution here, then I can see that the star constellations are bitingly bright while the air carries the first taste of frost. After nights like this, the mornings can be magical as the frost and fog combine to cast a spell across the valleys. Then … almost reluctantly it seems … the late rising sun burns off the remnants of the night and the rich colours of any remaining autumn foliage flare in the hedgerows.



Natural Remedies

Only too often November brings the beginning of the season for coughs, colds and snuffles, especially this year as our immune systems are out of practice and many of us are suffering from "the worst cold ever". But before heading off to the chemist to purchase pills and potions, it can be worth considering trying old-fashioned remedies first as there are many natural ways to help relieve the miserable symptoms of a cold.

Peppermint tea sipped slowly or made into an inhalation will help clear your breathing, as will eucalyptus oil. Put a few drops in a bowl of hot water, put your head under a towel above the bowl and inhale. Look after yourself when you're feeling under the weather by running a bath and adding a few drops of essential oils before soaking. Try thyme, eucalyptus, lemon and rosemary. A few drops of these oils on a piece of muslin tucked under your pillow at night will help to keep your head clear and make breathing easier.

One of the est ways of achieving a good night's sleep at the beginning of a cold is to drink a mixture of very hot lemon, hone and whisky if you like it, last thing at night. The classic cough mixture of lemon, honey and glycerine works just as well as it ever did and is much more palatable than many commercial remedies. The honey and glycerine are soothing, whilst the lemon adds a welcome sharpness and a good dose of Vitamin C to help your immune system fight off infection. Just add 150 ml clear hone and 50 ml glycerine to the strained juice of two lemons and mix well before drinking.


WINTER
"When icicles hang by the wall.... Then nightly sings
the staring owl, tu-who; tu-whit, a merry note...."
William Shakespeare

December

December brings Christmas - no explanation or introduction necessary I feel, and the end of the year with baubles, mistletoe and if we're lucky, perhaps a little snow!

The year grows old and the December days are short, though the darkest days are behind us by the end of the month as, imperceptibly at first, the hours of daylight will begin to grow longer again at last. Once the solstice has passed, there is the promise of rebirth, of new life as gradually the days begin to lengthen once more. For most of this month however, the days are still shortening, though they are cheered by the prospect of Christmas and celebrations to come.

The winter sun sets early, its slanting rays highlighting the few remaining hints of colour within our hedgerows. From within the leafless tangle of briar and hawthorn scarlet hips and haws may still be seen, though these are few and far between now.

Advent calendars are often hung on the first day of December - traditionally with a door to open every day, though modern versions often include a chocolate tucked away to enjoy each day. Then, of course, there's the eagerly anticipated ceremony of unearthing the box of Christmas decorations, whether that's from a dusty cardboard box on top of the wardrobe, or from their year-round resting place in the attic. Hopefully they were carefully packed away the previous year, so there won't be any breakages or tangled strings of lights!

The plants we associate with Christmas, that we use to deck our proverbial halls and kiss beneath are reminders of older celebrations of the longest night and the shortest day. These evergreens symbolised continuing life at a time when most plants have shed their leaves and everywhere looks more dead than alive. Holly was thought to be a female plant, whilst mistletoe was male and they were often hung together - hence the kissing! Beware the holly tree loaded with bright scarlet orbs however, as according to old country lore, a heavy crop of berries foretells hard weather ahead.

Here in England however, we're most unlikely to experience the white Christmas of our dreams since though December brings the beginning of winter, it isn't actually the coldest month of the year. This is because we're an island and the remnants of the summer's warmth still linger in the seas around us, only finally disappearing as January begins. Because of this warmth we're unlikely to see snow this month - in fact statistically snow is more likely to fall at Easter than at Christmas!

A seasonal tradition is that of the pantomime, when various celebrities take to the stage in comic dramatized versions of children's fairy tales or folk tales, such as Cinderella, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Dick Whittington and Aladdin. Among the cast you are always sure to find two characters - the attractive "principal boy" played by a female actor, and the grotesque "dame" played by a man. Audience participation is definitely encouraged too! (Oh no it isn't! Oh yes it is! Or he's behind you!)

Ringing out the old year and ringing in the new happens on New Year's Eve 31 December. This has only comparatively recently become a time for celebration in England, though the practice of kissing and singing to welcome in the New Year was recorded in England by the American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1856.

We have a general lack of New Year traditions here in England. This may be as New Year comes too soon after Christmas and carries with it a sense of time passing all too fast. New Year's Day didn't become an English Bank Holiday until 1974 in part to justify Scotland having an additional national holiday on 2 January. For many Scots Hogmanay was, and for some still is, more significant than Christmas.

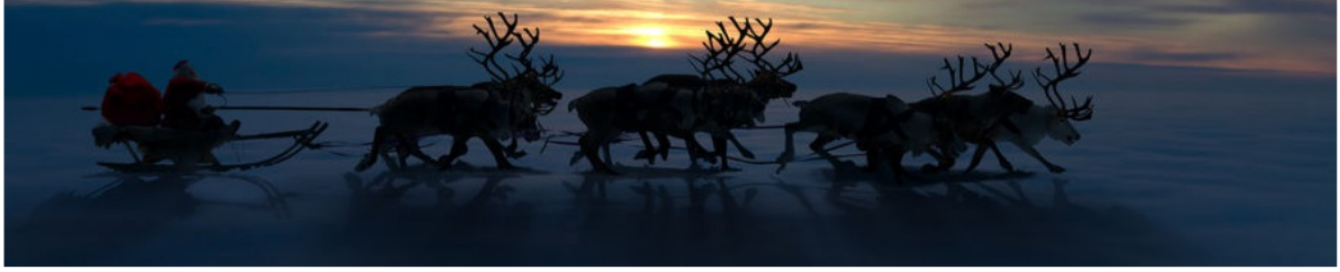
Rudolph and Friends

I'm sure that if you're at all like me, you'll remember many long-ago Christmas Eves when, too excited to sleep, you would like in bed waiting eagerly to hear the sound of a sleigh landing on the house rooftop. You may well have left a glass of milk (or something a little stronger!) and some mince pies or cookies for Father Christmas himself, and perhaps some carefully chosen and well-scrubbed carrots for his reindeer. But ... exactly how many reindeer are there - after all you need to be certain that you've put out enough carrots for them all to have a tasty morsel! According to "A Visit from St Nicholas" published in 1823, there are eight reindeer, and just in case you can't remember them all, here's a list to remind you ...

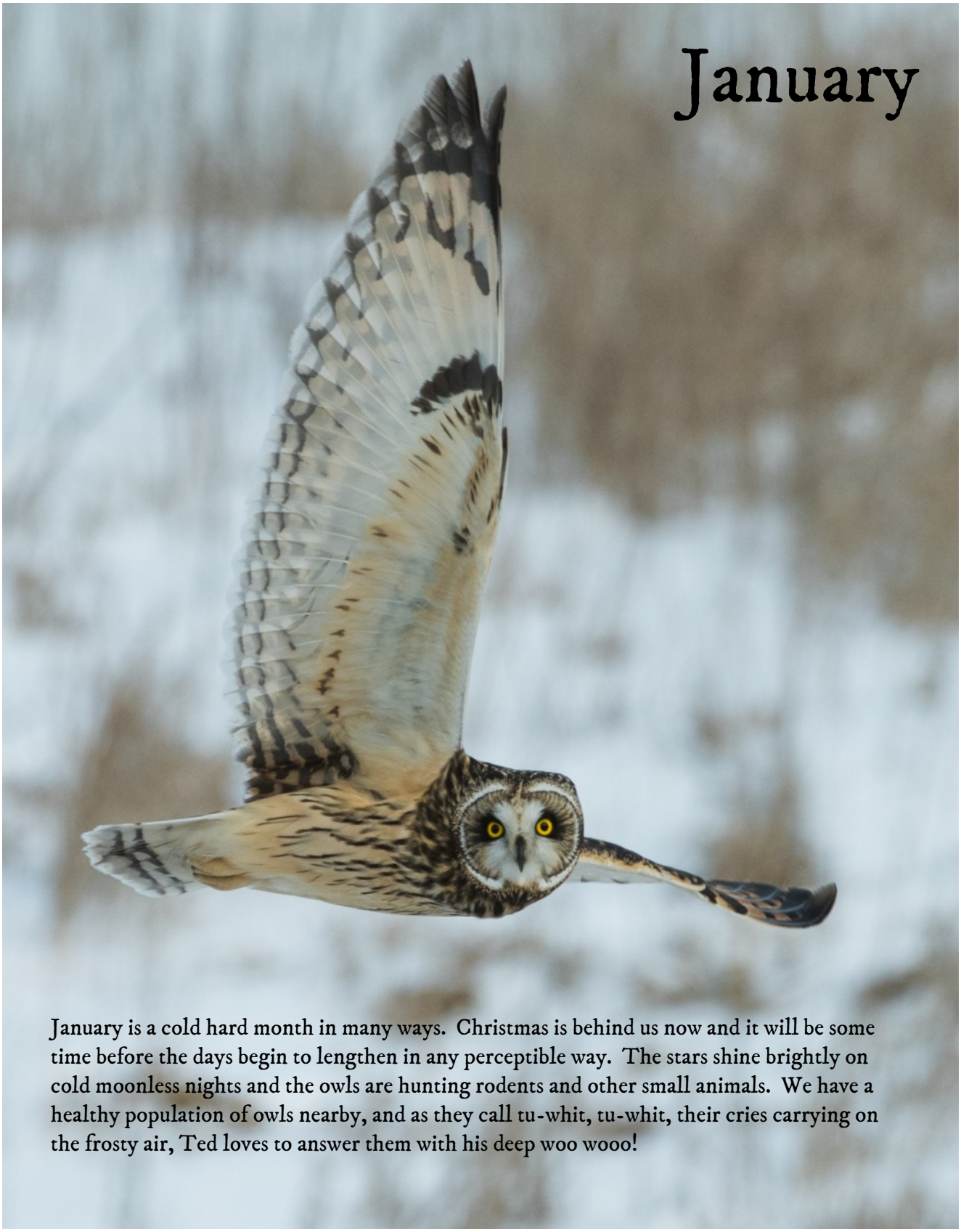
Dasher, Dancer, Prancer and Vixen, Comet,
Cupid, Donner and Blitzen!

The names of the first six remain unchanged from the original publication date to this day. But not so the final pair - Donner and Blitzen. Originally Donner was known as Dunder and Blitzen was called Blixem - these are the Dutch words for thunder and lightning. A version of the poem published some 15 years later changed their names to Donder and Blixen, since when they've changed again to their current form of Donner and Blitzen. But what about Rudolph? I hear you cry! Isn't he the chief reindeer, guiding the sleigh through all kinds of meteorological hazards by the light of his red nose that glows so brightly and enables Father Christmas and his other reindeer to see their way on even the darkest and foggiest nights?

Unlike Dasher, Dancer and the rest, Rudolph is a relatively recent addition to the reindeer stable. He was actually created by Robert L May, who was an advertising copywriter and first appeared in a colouring book called Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer that was published in America just before the outbreak of the second world war. Rudolph later went on to become the subject of a very well known song(!), further books and even a film. It is unknown whether the older, original reindeer resent Rudolph's meteoric rise to stardom and fame as nobody has ever been able to interview them. After their amazing exertions on Christmas Eve when they break the speed of sound, of light, appear in multiple places at once and probably break many other laws of physics, they are far too busy resting for the rest of the year around to give interviews to curious folk!



January



January is a cold hard month in many ways. Christmas is behind us now and it will be some time before the days begin to lengthen in any perceptible way. The stars shine brightly on cold moonless nights and the owls are hunting rodents and other small animals. We have a healthy population of owls nearby, and as they call tu-whit, tu-whit, their cries carrying on the frosty air, Ted loves to answer them with his deep woo wooo!

With the coming of the new year dull winter days may be interspersed with bright, but cold winter sun whose low rays cast long dark shadows across the frosty grass, silhouetting the woodlands and hills in the distance. The countryside has an austere beauty, all dusky greys, blacks, purples and ochre tones as every last green leaf has finally disappeared. But the shortest day is behind us and now we can begin to look forward to the first brave snowdrops peeping up through the frozen ground towards the end of the month.

Rather than stay indoors all day in January, tempting though this may seem, going for a long winter's walk can be very enjoyable. Remember the old saying "there's no such thing as bad weather just the wrong clothing!" I love to head out into the woods in January as there's so much to see now the trees are bare. There are generally four layers of habitat in our English woods - a ground layer of small plants such as mosses; a field layer of flowers and ferns; the undergrowth of hazel, hawthorn (and brambles and nettles in the summer months!) and finally the tree layer or canopy. .

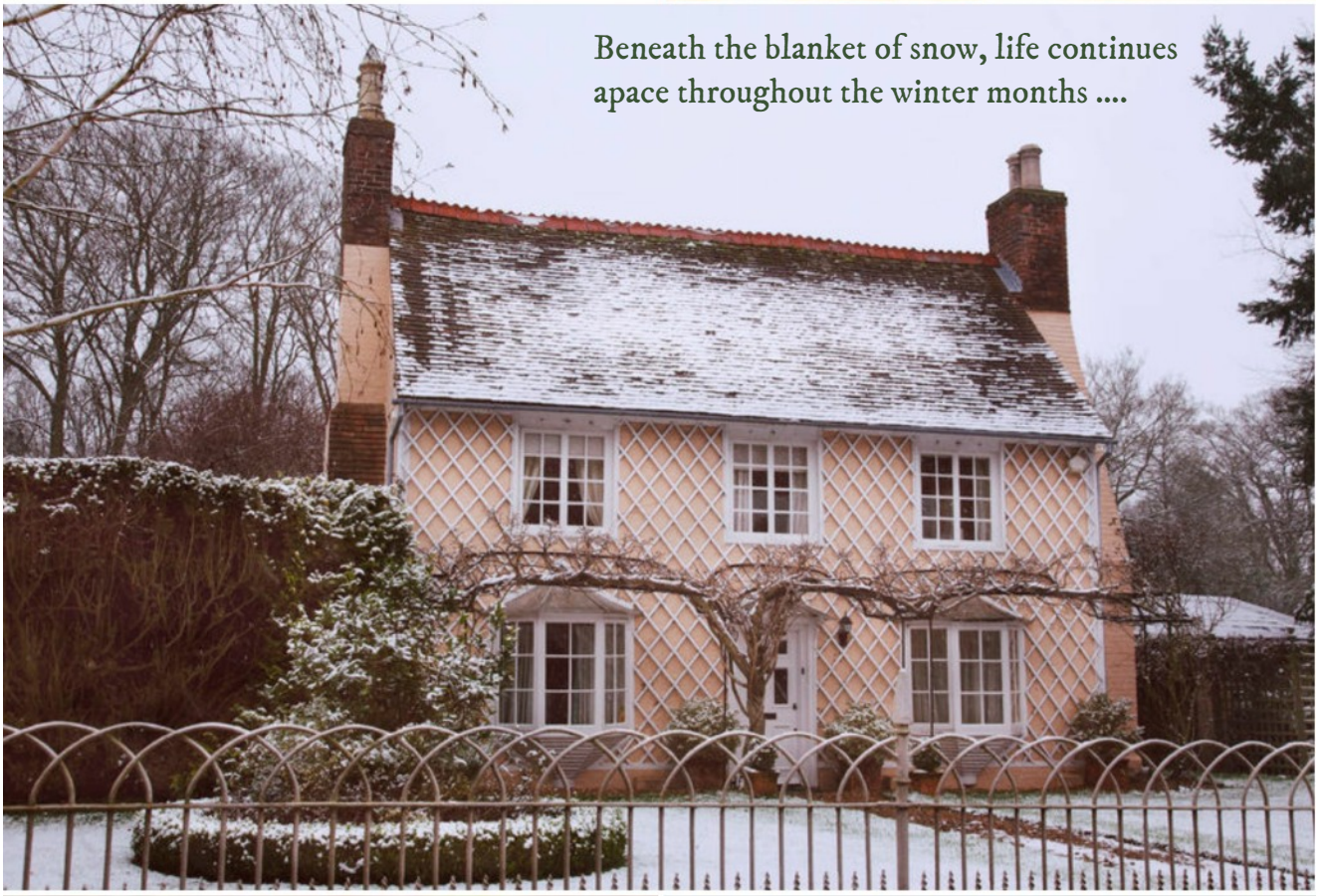
Catkins will already be appearing on hazel bushes, turning from lime green to yellow as the month progresses. You may spot the earliest shoots of wild garlic sprouting up through the leaf mould, recognisable by their pungent smell if you crush them between your fingers. In the gardens the earliest spring bulbs, including snowdrops of course, will be beginning to appear and hellebores will be in flower.

Many insects will be hiding or hibernating in the leaf mould and tree bark and you can spot many kinds of birds hunting them out, including tits, woodpeckers, wrens, robins, nuthatches and blackbirds. You may even hear the last before you see them as they briskly toss decaying leaves aside in their never-ending search for food. The winter months are also the most likely time to catch sight of an owl in daylight, since the shortage of food forces them to hunt for many more hours than is necessary in the summertime.

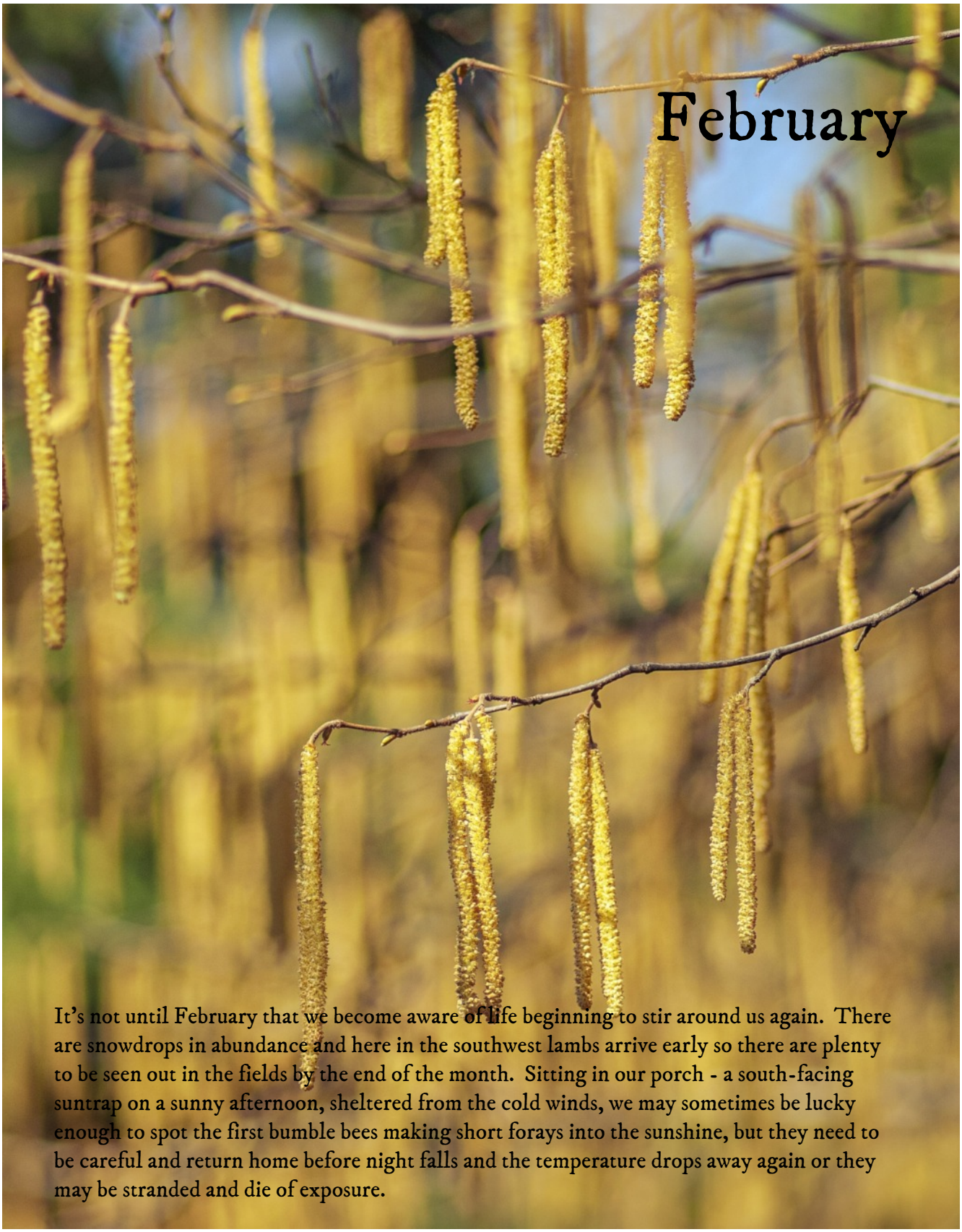
Keen gardeners may be outside washing out seed trays, edging lawns and undertaking other small tasks, whilst those of the fair weather variety (self included!) may be sitting indoors reading seed and bulb catalogues, making planting plans for the spring and summer months to come, encouraged by the passing of each January day when the sun lifts slightly higher above the southern horizon, and provides enough heat by the end of the month to make my unheated greenhouse pleasantly warm for a few short hours at least.

But though the countryside around us lies mostly bare and dormant, January brings a festival that celebrate trees and their crops, acting as a timely reminder that warm summer weather and the harvest will return again, however unlikely and far off that feels right now.

Wassailing is an ancient custom of the cider-producing regions of England (including Devon and Somerset) in which the wassail king or queen hangs pieces of cider-soaked bread in the branches of the largest or oldest tree in the orchard, wassail songs are sung and cider is poured onto its roots in the hope of enticing friendly spirits towards the tree. A wassail-cup is drunk - made by warming cider and apple juice with spices, sugar, citrus fruits and perhaps a splash of cider brandy! Finally, shots are fired through the chosen tree's branches, pots and pans are banged together loudly and so any lingering evil spirits are driven away, so guaranteeing a good harvest to come.



Beneath the blanket of snow, life continues apace throughout the winter months ....



February

It's not until February that we become aware of life beginning to stir around us again. There are snowdrops in abundance and here in the southwest lambs arrive early so there are plenty to be seen out in the fields by the end of the month. Sitting in our porch - a south-facing suntrap on a sunny afternoon, sheltered from the cold winds, we may sometimes be lucky enough to spot the first bumble bees making short forays into the sunshine, but they need to be careful and return home before night falls and the temperature drops away again or they may be stranded and die of exposure.

February is often thought of as a grey and gloomy month, the tail end of winter and one which we're glad to bid farewell. But for us here in the UK it's the time when we are most likely to see snow, even down here in the south-west.

There is a traditional belief that the heaviest snowfall of the year will occur on St Dorothea's Day - the sixth of the month. But if snow does fall it's guaranteed to cause great fun and excitement for children and, along with the inconvenience, lots for adults to enjoy too. The familiar countryside around us takes on a whole new aspect and wrapping up warm to enjoy a brisk walk, feet crunching through the snow is a real pleasure.

Though the first day of February falls less than six weeks after the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, by this day London has gained an extra 53 minutes of daylight between sunrise and sunset - and the days will continue to lengthen faster still as the month progresses. In the cities, on colder days, there are pink evening skies, and by the time the night clouds begin to reflect back the orange glow of sodium street lamps, the roar of homeward bound traffic fills the winter air.

February's rain and snow are welcomed by farmers to prepare the ground for the sowing and germination of seed hence the old sayings: "If in February there be no rain, 'tis neither good for hay nor grain.' Or 'Much February snow a fine summer doth show.'

For many farmers February is a slow month, a season of marking time, repairing fences and catching up with friends. And for those who have less contact with the land it may seem to be a month when nature itself is marking time, reluctant to come out while winter does its worst. But here in Somerset and across the southern half of the country at least, in gardens, woodlands and at the base of hedgerows across the country this is the month when the earliest spring flowers make their appearance and the tree buds begin to fatten on the branches.

One of the earliest, and very welcome, signs of spring is the appearance of snowdrops in gardens, woodland and hedgerows across the country. "Chaste snowdrop, venturous harbinger of spring," wrote Wordsworth. But be careful - rejoicing that spring has arrived when the very first flowers appear may be a little premature! On a snowdrop walk there will be very few other flowers to be seen - perhaps you may spot some early violets and some catkins of lambs' tails - the male flowers of the hazel in the hedgerow. Snowdrops begin to flower when the weather is still decidedly wintry as their leaf tips are tough enough to push up through the frozen ground. Not for nothing are the called perce-neige in France and snow piercers in parts of Britain.

Towards the end of the month blackthorn begins to blossom along the hedgerows, and a period of cold weather at this time of the year is called a "blackthorn winter." But February may also bring mild and damp weather, melting frost and snow and turning the ground beneath us to viscous gloopy mud that clings to paws and feet.

There isn't much food around at this time of year, so most wild creatures are still conserving energy, sleeping or hibernating the days away. Deer may be seen moving slowly along the hedges, using them for shelter and protection as well as what grazing they can find. It's time for a spring clean in the badger setts below the hedge though as their occupants pull out the old winter bedding and drag in fresh pillows of dried bracken and leaves.

In early February you may well spot one of the earliest signs of spring - pussy willow in the hedgerows. This is the name given to willow stems bearing small soft and fluffy grey catkins. The UK is home to a number of different willow species, including the weeping willow, crack willow and white willow (which supplies the wood used for cricket bats). Goat and grey, or sallow, willow are those which produce these delightful pussy willow catkins. Look out for them in woodland, hedgerows and wasteland, in particular in damp and boggy areas near lakes, streams and ponds.


Winter is the time for comfort,
for good food and warmth,
for the touch of a friendly hand
and for a talk beside the fire:
it is the time for home
Edith Sitwell

I do hope you enjoy working your Wheel of the Year project. If you'd like to learn more about Bustle & Sew, then please do visit the Bustle & Sew website.

https://bustleandsew.com

You can keep up to date with all the goings-on at Bustle & Sew HQ on my blog, or why not try the Bustle & Sew Magazine? There's no advertising whatsover, just lots of lovely pages of content celebrating life here in the English countryside - with sewing very much at its heart of course.

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Very best wishes

Helen