



Fascination of Plants Day

May 18th 2012

Fascination of Plants Day was launched by the European Plant Science Organisation to raise interest in plants and awareness of the importance of plant science for agriculture, horticulture, forestry and environmental conservation. Issues addressed by plant science include food and nutrition, plant breeding, climate change mitigation, renewable resources and sustainable production. Plant science is not restricted to laboratories; plant science is all around us and forms a critical part of social and environmental landscapes.

More than 560 Institutions in 39 countries across the world are participating in Fascination of Plants day.

By picking out some seasonal food products that are local to Kent and explaining concepts that link food choices to the environment and connect us with food producers we hope to highlight social aspects of plant science and heighten awareness of the plants growing both wild and cultivated in the area.

The Graduate School at the University of Kent funded this display.

Text and photographs were contributed by current and former students on the MSc in Ethnobotany programme at the School of Anthropology and Conservation, University of Kent.

**University of
Kent**

School of
Anthropology
and Conservation

EDIBLE FLOWERS

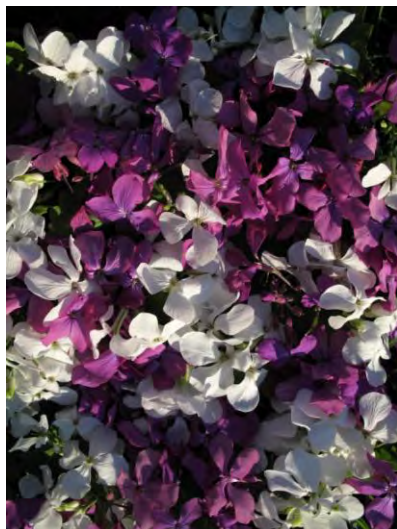


Before the mid-nineteenth century, flowers were still a major part of the common man's diet and remedies. The roses, violets, carnations and pansies of their day were not purchased at the florists; they were collected from home gardens and by the wayside.



Instead of placing them in a vase to be admired they were put to good use in salads, conserves, tonics and syrups. However, as the population began to move to cities for work, easy and cheap access to these flowers declined.

Gardening became a middle class hobby as the size of home gardens shrank and the countryside was pushed back by the urban sprawl. Those who could afford a garden large enough for more than a few vegetables could afford to buy their staples from the market; the garden was becoming a mark of status rather than an integral part of the household economy.



For a generation who had moved away from the extended family and was being instructed by book on keeping house, flowers were relegated to nostalgic footnotes in the efficient cookery and household management guides of the day. Instead of being part of dietary intake they were being put to use in cut-flower arrangements and sentimentalised in poetry, folklore and moralizing tales of flowers.

Flowers had become differentiated from flowering plants. They had been appropriated as symbols of virtue rather than used for their virtues. With the loss of practical knowledge, a new understanding of flowers with middle class values attached to them took its place.

Text by Emily Chen. Photos (Calendula, Heartsease, Sweet Rocket) by Susanne Masters.

HOPS: FLOWERS AND SHOOTS



Hop flowers are an essential ingredient for most beers but hop plants (*Humulus lupulus*) also yield another edible part; shoots. Hops are a perennial plant with large root systems that throw up numerous shoots in spring. Hop farmers thin the shoots to direct the plants energy into a few shoots that are trained up twine for the hop flowers to be harvested at the end of the summer.

Hop shoots can be foraged from the hedgerow and with support from the brewing industry cultivated hop shoots are being reintroduced to menus. Hop shoots can be lightly steamed or sautéed to enjoy their samphire like flavour or used as an ingredient in more complex dishes.

Kent's climate is particularly suited to hop growing and local architecture is influenced by hops, as oast houses were designed to dry the flowers on the day they were harvested. Until the 1950s hop picking holidays at harvesting time punctuated the lives of Londoners. Before paid holiday leave hop picking holidays met the demand for seasonal workers and provided an opportunity for urban dwellers on low incomes to escape the city. It was an era of communal holidays so families followed up their hard work with music, singing and dancing. Although hop picking holidays have ended George Orwell immortalised them in his diary when he came to Kent for hop picking on one of the trains known as 'hopper specials' that brought hop pickers from London.

Text and photo (Hop Shoots) by Susanne Masters.

NETTLES



Stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*) has an extensive history of use as a food and textile plant in the British Isles, with early recipes for nettle broth dating back as far as the sixth century. Nettle leaves are considered similar to commonly eaten spinach leaves in terms of nutrition and can be cooked in similar ways. Nettles are high in chlorophyll and despite being leafy greens they also have high levels of, iron, calcium, Vitamin C and Vitamin A. Nettles thrive in areas with high soil mineral content, which gives them high phosphorous and potassium levels, both of which are essential for healthy bones.

The leaves can also be brewed into a refreshing tea with diuretic properties, that helps to maintain a healthy liver and keep blood pressure low. This tea is delicious with a wedge of lemon, and it is delightful to watch the citric acid present in the lemon slowly change the colour of the tea from dark green to bright pink! This change in colour indicates the presence of anthocyanins, the molecules also responsible for the dark colours in blueberries and cranberries. Anthocyanins are often associated with antioxidant activity and are currently being researched for antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory properties.

FARMERS MARKETS



The globalised world we are living in today makes it easy for people to feel powerless. The grocery market in the UK is now dominated by four enormous multi-national corporations, all offering a limited range of fruit, veg and meat from around the globe at low prices. The real price of this system is unfortunately a little obscured.

As food travels thousands of miles it generates a large carbon footprint, and its nutrition value may decrease on the journey. Money spent in the supermarkets is immediately whisked out of communities and into global enterprise and expansion, and this serves to damage local business further.

Local farmers markets are a means for communities to build a sustainable future together, despite how difficult corporations might make it. If you've lost faith in the politicians' abilities to drive social change for the better then vote with your pound! Home-grown, spray free, nutritious food at competitive prices is better for you, your community and your economy. We, literally, have nothing to lose but our chain shops.



Text by Patrick Mckenna. Photos (Squashes, Four different Chile Pepper varieties) by Susanne Masters.

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY



People worldwide are united by the desire to produce, share and eat good food that suits them, in a way that suits them.

Notions of edibility vary across cultures and ecosystems. This rich tapestry of biocultural diversity is celebrated globally, particularly within the Slow Food movement¹. Although “good” is subjective, often it is associated with food that is safe, nutritious and culturally-acceptable. For those supporting organic production, fair trade and localisation, good food may also be considered part of a system that tries to avoid harm to others, emphasising caring, ecology, sustainability and social justice.

Access to good, clean, fair food is being compromised by a lack of trade policies and practices that serve peoples’ rights to safe, healthy and ecologically sustainable production.

“Food sovereignty” was coined in 1996 by Via Campesina, a diverse movement of peoples in South America². Born out of a fight by communities to survive and thrive from local, natural resources, it was formally embraced in the Nyéléni Declaration signed in Mali in 2007, that defined it as:

*“A policy framework advocated by a number of farmers, peasants, pastoralists, fisherfolk, indigenous peoples, women, rural youth and environmental organizations, namely the **claimed "right" of peoples to define their own food, agriculture, livestock and fisheries systems, in contrast to having food largely subject to international market forces**”.*

Although food sovereignty was originally led by peasants in the Global South and had its roots in the international development context, food activists worldwide are recognising the power of its principles. It has been adopted by those concerned about the control that giant corporations wield in food production alongside the challenges of cheap oil, toxic products and climate chaos.

¹ An international non-profit, eco-gastronomic member association that links the pleasure of food to a commitment to community and the environment

www.slowfood.org

² www.viacampesina.org

Text and photo (Traditional West African foods at Slow Food gathering) by Petra Bakewell-Stone.

PRINCIPLES OF FOOD SOVEREIGNTY¹



1. Food: a basic human right
2. Agrarian reform
3. Protecting natural resources
4. Recognising food trade
5. Ending the globalisation of hunger
6. Social peace
7. Democratic control

Food sovereignty reconceptualises people as citizens and co-producers, bestowing power on individuals, rather than abstract markets and corporations. The idea permeates vibrant community food initiatives and the ever-rising interest in grow-your-own and self-reliance, adding “a positive political edge that encourages anyone concerned with their food to consider the context of how it was produced”².

Whereas food security addresses rights-based access, food sovereignty invites us to question where our food is from and negotiate local definitions of food from within communities.

Food in England is largely controlled by supermarkets that determine what is sold, often deferring or obscuring hidden costs, and dumping cheap imported goods on “consumers”. Food sovereignty reconceptualises people as citizens and co-producers, bestowing power on individuals, rather than abstract markets and corporations. The idea permeates vibrant community food initiatives and the ever-rising interest in grow-your-own and self-reliance, adding “a positive political edge that encourages anyone concerned with their food to consider the context of how it was produced”³.

A British example is Fordhall Farm, a small-scale organic farm in Shropshire saved from developers in 2006 by a pioneering scheme raising £800,000 to buy the farm by selling shares in the cooperative Fordhall Community Land Initiative. It now leases to sister Charlotte (28) and brother Ben (26) Hollins whose father had worked the land since 1929. England’s first community-owned farm, its ownership model protects Fordhall and its sustainable farming methods and ensures that the farm is run for the benefit of the community, and incorporates educational activities.

¹ Via Campesina

² Vosper, N. (2011) ‘Food sovereignty movement goes global.’ Positive news Issue 70 Winter 2011

³ Vosper, N. (2011) ‘Food sovereignty movement goes global.’ Positive news Issue 70 Winter 2011

VIEW OF FOOD SOVEREIGNTY FROM AFRICA



"Agriculture in the next generation is likely to be under foreigners who have grabbed land in Tanzania and in many African countries. They grow food which they want and know they will benefit [from] economically and within a short period. These foreigners do not consider and have no concern for the health of national[s].

My opinion is that unless policies are changed for the benefit of national[s] to make sure land is controlled by nationals, the younger generations will have no land for agriculture. Agriculture will no longer be the backbone of Tanzanian economy.

In a few years time, if the trend of grabbing our land continues, foreigners will be producing all food crops etc. leaving the young generation with no land making them labourers, with little pay, living in poor conditions, thus making them poorer with illiterate children. At my 74 [years of age] I have seen this happening although activists myself included have demanded that land control be placed in the hands of nationals, so far with no success. We are still demanding land rights.

Most agricultural produce will be exported by land grabbers and or local products will have no market. In some regions these foreigners have up-rooted coffee and plant flowers. I see food production not improving unless the government, local government the ordinary wananchi [citizens] get involved and demand to see all the land contracts and guard their land. Education on land rights is necessary for most Tanzanians as most of them do not know their land rights nor have they seen the land laws."

Statement by Food activist and Slow Food campaigner, Freda Chale of Regent Estate Senior Women's Organisation (RESEWO), Tanzania.

Text and photo (RESEWO traditional leafy vegetables demonstration plot) by Petra Bakewell-Stone.