

Winter 2021

It is January and the David Parr House garden lies withdrawn into its winter sleep. Even though the beds are bare and flowerless it can still be enchanting when the low sun casts long shadows across the ground or the frost wraps every remaining twig, stalk and dried leaf in delicate white fur. At such times I imagine the garden in the winter moonlight, an inner vision of stillness and blue shadow.

The garden has passed through its seasons very quietly this past year. There have been few people to see the Spring daffodils give way to Summer roses and these to Autumn dahlias, except for the virtual tour visitors for whom, in the garden, it is forever May.



Like Alfred, I keep a garden diary and looking back over the last year I see that there have been inhabitants and visitors, of a sort, to keep me company. There is a black cat that saunters round; not interested in conversation it sits in the sun on the path washing itself, a study in mindfulness. Once in a while it stares in my direction, then suddenly jerks alert and fixes its terrified gaze at something behind me as if it has just seen Vlad the Impaler over my left shoulder. I fall for it every time, turning round in alarm to see ... nothing.

A mouse ran out from under the plants while I was on my knees weeding. 'Eeek!' I cried, just like the silly ladies in the comics. A glistening green frog has startled me once or twice by jumping out at me, but I have managed to say hello once I've got my breath back. There is a toad I'm always pleased to encounter that lurks in the damp area under the vine near the tap, and the night camera has captured a hedgehog snuffling through the undergrowth; it is very welcome to the fallen apples in exchange for its work in pest control.

As ever, the prolific Bramley apple at the centre of the garden, despite getting a prune, produced a big crop of apples. The squirrels, who always seem to have overdosed on stimulants, get another high from the apples. They career over the fence and into the tree, grabbing a fruit, taking a bite, throwing it down and rushing on, dislodging more fruit as they go. So gardening is made extra thrilling by the thud of apple ordnance narrowly missing the toiler below and a couple of times managing a stunning strike on the back of the head. I think they take aim, I do.



This past year I found myself looking round the garden and thinking about the medicinal properties of plants and their traditional role in healing and well-being. I began to study how many plants we happen to have here in the David Parr House garden and their uses, past or present, in cures and drugs.

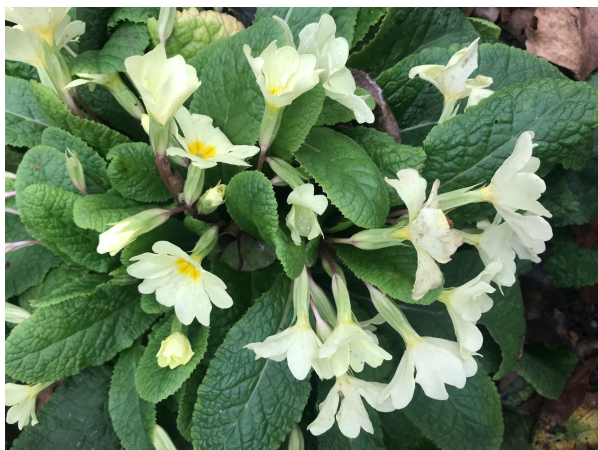
Lemon Balm, with its crinkly green leaves and little white flowers, grows and seeds itself in various parts of the garden and is a pleasure to brush past as it releases a fresh cologne scent. It is used to flavour teas and drinks and said to relieve anxiety: hence its name. Modern herbals say there is no proof of this but remembering that Elsie enjoyed scented plants, perhaps, like many of us, she found certain scents very soothing. Lavender is still in use as a perfume, clothing protector and as an essential oil in massage and therapy, famed for calming the nerves and helping to bring sleep. It is grown by the path here so that visitors can catch the scent.



Sage, with its silver-green leaves and purple flowers, has culinary uses of course, but I remember being given it as tea for a sore throat. Poppies make a show here in the Summer and (made from its petals) poppy syrup for a cough was one of the more pleasant medicines of my childhood. The sap of the opium poppy has a long history of use as a narcotic and analgesic. Foxglove is used in modern drugs too and, like the Poppy, reminds us that healing and harm can exist together — the word ‘pharmakon’, I discover, combines both medicine and poison in its meaning.

‘There’s Rosemary, that’s for remembrance...’ In the poetry, Shakespeare’s audience would have caught the reference to the common use of the plant by the old as an aid to memory. Scholars might put a sprig in their gown when taking exams and actors too, when learning their lines. It was also used as a cure for bad breath — a benefit actors playing Romeo and Juliet might well have been grateful for.

What garden does not have Dandelions? Tea from the root was believed to be good for the liver and as children we thought the milk from its stalk would cure warts. Calendula from Marigolds has long been used as an antiseptic and treatment for skin rashes, burns and bruises. With Elsie’s well-known love for her garden it is not surprising to find a ‘Floral Album for the Piano’ among her sheet music; the jaunty piece for Marigold (which can be heard played on the website) is in keeping with its cheerful colour and its mental and physical wound-healing properties.



And so to the only plant that is out now in the garden — the lovely Primrose, telling us to Keep Calm and Carry On. An infusion from the root was once used as a sedative to bring peace to shattered nerves. In its name ‘primus’ resides its claim to be the ‘first’ flower of Spring and a clue to its meaning in the language of flowers: it symbolises youth and the hope that life will be renewed.

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