

BRIAN'S NATURE DIARY for June

In my herb garden this is the month when everything seems suddenly to take over. The greenish flowers of the tall Alexanders, which our ancestors used as celery, have already begun to mature into the chunky black seeds. This year I am looking forward to loading some of them into the pepper mill to use as a condiment. I already use the young leaves as flavouring in my soups and stews, and occasionally steam a handful as a tasty green vegetable.

The foxgloves are six feet tall. That's twice the usual height of the wild plant, and the flowers come in three colours, the normal deepest pink, a delicate pale pink, and a creamy white, all of them retaining the spotted throat markings which act as bumblebee guides. Of course this very poisonous plant is well-known for being the source of digitalin, a drug still valued in medicine as a heart stimulant.

I also have in flower a febrifuge. In other words a plant used to reduce fevers. To us it is better known as feverfew, a close cousin of the garden chrysanthemum. Its main use today is to give relief from headaches. Steep seven of its aromatic leaves in boiling water, strain, add a little honey to sweeten, drink it and your headache should start to disappear shortly. I have found that mixing this plant with a few leaves of rosemary makes it even more effective. Apparently it can also be used as a mild intestinal worm killer! Some folk enjoy the pungent flavour of its leaves, used sparingly in a salad. My version of feverfew originated from a muddy lane next to a church overlooking the Welland valley. It has pretty semi-double flowers which always come true. Batchelor's buttons is one of its many nicknames.

Threatening to take over the herb border is St John's Wort. This plant has narrow leaves and clusters of bright yellow flowers. Look closely at the leaves, against the light, and you will see that they are covered with tiny semi-transparent dots. The herb still has several uses in modern medicine. Perhaps best-known of these is its use as a modern-day pick-me-up. Once again a tea prepared from the fresh or dried leaves should be drunk twice a day. It should be taken for several weeks before the full effects are felt. A word of warning, however. This drug makes some people's eyes sensitive to light. I remember one person who took it calling for sunglasses on a dull, grey January day! My St John's wort came as a tiny seedling found on a railway embankment near Watford. It has grown bigger every year, so that this year I really must divide it. No doubt several friends can be persuaded to take a piece for their own gardens.

MY TIP OF THE MONTH: Doubtless you carefully save all vegetable matter from the kitchen for the compost heap. Believe it or not cabbage stems are better used in home-made soups. Cut away the tough outside rind (this can be composted). You will then be left with the soft heart which can be chopped or sliced to add flavour and bulk to your soup.