

Pulling up wild flowers

I have been out pulling up wild flowers, or weeding as it is sometimes called; it is an often stated truism that weeds are merely wild flowers growing in the wrong place, and my garden is a domesticated area, no place for the wild. At one time England was forest round here, East Sussex. It would have been mostly oak, and it took quite a while before man made much impression on it. The Romans put roads through it, but even they soon grew over after they had left and it was not until the ironmasters of the sixteen hundreds began wanting charcoal on a large scale to produce their cannon any real impression was made.

Flowers like speedwell, buttercup, dandelions, primroses and Jack-by-the-hedge do not grow in the shade of dense woodland. They would have been confined to those marginal places where rocks stuck up out of the ground and the soil between rock and forest was not deep enough for trees. Now the general use of herbicides in agriculture has made them rare we are often not so much threatening them with extinction as returning them to their original frequency.

The ones that have suffered from this are the woodland plants, like honeysuckle, and the bees. Trees are a good source of nectar for bees, a tree has many more flowers per square yard of land than most plants. We cut the trees down, but then we replaced them with flower filled meadows and crops that were filled with weeds, not a complete disaster for the bees. When I bought my first hive of bees from an old boy in Wittersham he told me that as a sixteen year old, fifty years before that, he kept fifty hives and got a hundred pounds of honey a year from each, by the time I met him, thirty years ago he had only twenty five hives and got twenty to twenty five pounds from each. Herbicides have given us meadows that only grow grass and weed free arable crops, tasteless milk, and honey that comes only from the ever shortening hedgerows, or mono-crops like rape and clover.

Now the honey is in different places, and so are the beekeepers. Suburban London has good sources of nectar in garden flowers and ornamental trees, but it also has a high population of beekeepers, and a dense population of bees competing with each other. My friend who keeps bees in Kennington, the commercial inner city, gets a better honey crop than my brother in law in urban Surrey, the populated outer suburbs. The Kennington honey is wonderful, fragrant honey as well. I think, from the scent, most comes from the buddleia bushes that thrive beside the railways, pop up on any vacant lot, and sprout from any cracked or neglected brickwork. Ivy and buddleia are the bee's secret weapons, tearing down the works of man and supplying wonderful sources of nectar.

Man has changed the environment, but the changes are multiple, and they have not resulted in a single environment. When I was young we would play a game of picking one of every sort of flower we could find, when we got home we would see who had most, and look them up in the flora. It was most enlightening, one rapidly learned to look for flowers that did not initially present as such, grasses for example, and as soon as that happened you began to realise that different grasses grew in different places, and so did different flowers. The flowers that make it along the verge between the wood and the road are not the same ones as those in the open

spaces in the wood where the trees have been harvested, acid soil does not grow the same plants as alkaline, flat places do not have the same flora as steep banks, and the flora of a North facing bank or path edge is different to a South facing one.

In my teens we would camp each year on the same fruit farm near Maidstone. When the apple trees were pruned in Autumn the wood was burned in a large bonfire, which resulted in a bare circle by the time we arrived next Whitson bank holiday. My father made a wooden square which covered this area and hammered four stakes into the ground which it would fit over. Along the sides of the square he put projecting nails every four inches so that we could thread a lattice of string across it, drop it over the stakes and record the plants growing in each four inch square every year, we also measured and recorded the ph level, that is the acidity, of the soil. At first it was only a few mosses and lichens grew there, but as rain washed the soluble products of the wood ash from the soil and the alkalinity dropped we began to see other things, like docks and nettles, and then dandelions and speedwell, until after five or six years it had returned to the original grasses, but a little bit greener and lusher from the extra nitrogen remaining in the soil.