

# Reprint **Island Tides**

Visit [www.islandtides.com](http://www.islandtides.com) for more interesting articles on other BC, national & international topics

Reprint from Volume 2 Number 25

December 6, 1990

## **Wildflowers ~ Brenan Simpson**

When the Normans invaded England in 1066, they brought with them the French language, including the word *dague*, meaning a short, pointed weapon which came to be called in English a 'dagger'. A second English word which came from the same source was *dag*, which was also a short and pointed implement but made out of wood, like a toothpick or a skewer. Now it is obviously quite important that the type of wood which one uses to make a skewer be suitable for that purpose. It must be hard enough to take good point and not break when it is pushed into meat, free of any taste and not likely to give off splinters. A certain shrub which grew throughout Europe had been found to produce the best wood for this and had been called various names related to this use, including the *Pricke Timber Tree*, which 'butchers used to make prickses.' As the word *dag* became more common in English and replaced *pricke* in normal usage, the wood from this shrub began to be called *dagge wood* and this eventually became the common name of the whole shrub, being corrupted by the seventeenth century into *dogges wood* and later into *dogwood*.

Probably because of the similarity between a skewer and the pointed horn of an animal, the latin word for horn, *cornus* (as in Unicorn or One Horn) became the name of the species of plants to which the dogwood belongs. In time, as North America was explored by Europeans, more members of the *Cornus* family were discovered, including one which was named after Thomas Nuttall, the curator of the Harvard

Botanical Gardens from 1822-1832, who went on several expeditions in search of plants and found the tree which we now call the *Cornus nuttalli* growing on the Pacific Coast. Appropriately, therefore, its common name has become the Pacific Dogwood.

If you are not quite certain what a dogwood flower looks like, all you have to do is take a look at the funnel of any passing B.C. Ferry and there it is. It is the provincial flower of B.C. Having said that, however, to be accurate, what we think of as being the dogwood flower is not really the flower at all. The large creamy-white 'petals' are not petals but bracts, or covers for the real flowers, which are very small and bunch together in the centre of the 'flowers'. The seed pods of these true flowers swell and turn red in autumn, giving the tree a spectacular second burst of colour, particularly when the leaves turn gold and red at around the same time and a second crop of 'flowers' appears to complete the picture.

The Pacific Dogwood is one of the few plants actually protected by law in this province but despite this they are often illegally cut down to make room for development and nothing ever seems to be done about it. In addition, a disease is presently killing many of these trees and no remedy has yet been found that is effective against it. Sadly, the Pacific Dogwood may well be as forgotten by our great-grandchildren as the *Pricke Timber Tree* is by ourselves.

*Brenan's wildflower articles are also published as a book Flowers at My Feet: West Wildflowers in Legend, Literature and Lore. /*

© Island Tides Publishing Ltd. This article may be reproduced with this attribution, in its entirety, with notification to Island Tides Publishing Ltd.

*'This article was published (December 6, 1990) in 'Gulf Islands, Island Tides'. 'Island Tides' is an independent, regional newspaper distributing 15,000-20,000 copies in the Southern Strait of Georgia from Tsawwassen to Victoria, BC.'*

Island Tides, Box 55, Pender Island, BC, Canada. Phone: 250-629-3660. Fax: 250-629-3838.  
Email: [islandtides@gulfislands.com](mailto:islandtides@gulfislands.com). Website: <http://www.islandtides.com>