

Reprint **Island Tides**

Visit www.islandtides.com for more interesting articles on other BC, national & international topics

Reprint from Volume 2 Number 3

February 1, 1990

Wildflowers—Sweet Briar and Snow Berries

Brenan Simpson

Although we can easily bring colour into our gardens in winter by planting such imported shrubs and trees as the very late flowering winter jasmine or the early-flowering witch hazel, to name but two, there are virtually none of our native wild flowers in bloom at this time of year. Low temperatures have killed the annuals and sent the perennials into a state of dormancy.

Even if any of them were to flower, there would be no pollinating insects around to make it worth the plants' effort. But lack of flowers does not mean lack of colour in our wildflower community, for many of our shrubs not only produced flowers last summer to attract insects but they then went on to produce brightly coloured fruit and berries to attract birds. The birds, in turn, spread the seeds around in their droppings, all neatly coated in organic fertilizer, ready to sprout in spring.

The two most obvious fruits and berries at this time of year on the Gulf Islands are Rosehips and Snowberries, which line miles of our roadsides. Those who know Shakespeare's *Midsummer Nights Dream* undoubtedly recall the speech 'I know a bank where the wild thyme grows....' also on that bank grew 'Eglantine' or *Rosa eglantheria*, the sweet briar. 'Madame Eglantyne' was the name of Chaucer's Prioress in 'The Canterbury Tales', and *Rosa eglantheria*, with its clear pink

flowers and bright hips grows freely on all of our islands. It is easily recognizable in Spring and Summer, particularly after rain, by the sweet apple-like scent of its leaves. Chaucer and Shakespeare must have recognized it in exactly the same way—that's something to think about when you walk by the rose and smell what they smelled.

Although the Snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*) is probably just as old, if not even older, it is a North American native and was not known to Europeans until it was found in the Pacific Northwest by the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804–1806.

US President Thomas Jefferson referred to it in a letter dated December 8, 1813, saying 'We call it the snowberry bush, no botanical name being yet given to it.' Again, it is easily recognizable in winter by its large white berries on leafless stems.

Even though Mr. Lewis and Captain Clark received no recognition in the eventual naming of the Snowberry, whose botanical name is merely a description of the plant ('clusters of white berries'), they are remembered in two other plants which still grow wild in this general area and whose hybridized cousins appear in many gardens—the 'Lewisia' and the 'Clarkia'.

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 (February 1, 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. Website: <http://www.islandtides.com>