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## Wildflowers ~ Brenan Simpson

I doubt if many of our readers will remember the words of a once highly popular Victorian Song:

*'Come into the garden, Maude,  
I am here at the gate alone,  
And the woodbine spices are wafted abroad  
And the musk of the rose is blown.'*

If you don't recall them, it doesn't really matter for the only reason I've quoted them is because of the third line, about the 'woodbine spices'. Woodbine is another common name of the Honeysuckle, of which we have two different varieties growing here on the Gulf Islands, the Orange honeysuckle (*Lonicera ciliosa*) and the Purple honeysuckle (*Lonicera hispidula*). Both are vines, but the orange variety, with its bunches of bright orange tubular flowers, is a much better climber than its purple cousin, which seems happier to trail around on the ground and twist itself amongst the branches of the lower shrubs. The leaves of both varieties grow in pairs, opposite each other at regular intervals along the plants' woody stems. It was the plant's tendency to bind itself to other species which gave rise to the name 'Woodbinde', which was later corrupted to its present form. The name 'Honeysuckle', which was originally applied to clovers rather than to woodbines, refers, of course, to the sweet taste of the flowers when they are sucked. Just for the record, the name 'Lonicera' is derived from that of a sixteenth century German physician, Lonitzer.

Back again to Maude. If that 'tall and stately' young woman had come into a Gulf Island garden where only the native woodbines grew, hoping to smell the spices being wafted abroad, she would have been in for a big disappointment, for

neither of them has any scent at all. They don't need it. Because of the long tubular shape of the flowers and the fact that the nectar is right down at the bottom of the tube, only a creature with a long, narrow tongue can get far enough inside to reach it and pollinate

the plant at the same time. In this region of the globe, that creature is the hummingbird, which is attracted to the plants by the colour of the petals and is utterly disinterested in any scents whatever. In England, where the poem was written (by Tennyson, if you're interested), there are no hummingbirds and the only creatures with long enough tongues to get down into the native honeysuckles there are certain moths. Moths have a very strong sense of smell and, in addition, they do most of their flying at night, when predators can't see them and when all flowers, like cats, look grey. So to attract moths to their flowers, English honeysuckles have a very sweet scent, which reaches its greatest strength after dark.

So here we have that poet, the son of a rector, forty-six years old when he wrote the poem, hanging around a garden gate in the dark, calling on young Maude, who, he admits, was 'not seventeen' even, to come out in the garden and smell the honeysuckle. Tut, tut!

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



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