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Wildflowers ~ Brenan Simpson

You all know what a geranium is, don't you? Isn't it that plant with a big red mop-head of flowers that mother always grew in a pot on the windowsill every winter?

Well, that's not quite right. What nearly everyone calls a 'geranium' is actually a zonal pelargonium and not a geranium at all. To be fair, it does belong to the same plant family, which comprises the true geraniums or Crane's bill, the Erodium or Heron's bill and the Pelargonium or Stork's bill. The common names, by the way, come from some perceived similarity between the shape of the plants' ripe seed and that of the various birds' bills. But a pelargonium is not a geranium, any more than an apple is a pear, even though they too belong to one family.

Now, if you want to see a true geranium, probably all you'll have to do is look around in your garden, for the geranium is a Northern hemisphere wild flower and at least two of its many varieties grow here on the Islands in great profusion. These are the Geranium molle, or Dove's-foot Crane's bill and the Geranium robertianum or Herb Robert.

The Dove's-foot geranium is a low growing plant found almost everywhere on the Islands, except in deep shade. It is a very early flowering annual plant, which continues to flower late into the season. The emerging seed develops into a tight rosette of greyish-green leaves and these eventually reach a width of an inch or more, being round in shape with quite deep indentations all around. The plant may spread up to 18 inches in diameter. The flowers are pink and comprise five petals, regularly spaced around the flower head, with deep V notches at the tip of each petal. If you have little pink flowers growing in your lawn this is what they probably are. However, if you lawn flowers have almost fern-like leaves, they are probably Heron's bills or Erodiums.

The second local geranium, the Herb Robert, was

considered to be an important medicinal herb in Europe in the Middle Ages, being used extensively for healing wounds. It is said to be named after Robert of Moleme, an

11th century healer. This plant is also an annual, a prolific self-seeder and prefers to grow in light shade. It is a much taller plant than the Dove's-foot geranium, growing to a height of up to 20 inches. Its leaves are a dark olive green in colour, very deeply indented all around and generally change colour to a deep red if the plant becomes short of moisture. The flowers are pink, about three quarters of an inch wide, with five petals spaced regularly, but lacking the notch referred to above. The best recognition feature of this plant, however, is that the stems are red in colour.

The first known reference to Herb Robert is in a manuscript written in 1265, where it was called 'Herba Roberti'. A volume on Herbs, published in 1578, states that 'the fourth kind of geranium is known in English as Herbe Robert.' So even in 1578 they knew what a geranium was, and it wasn't a pelargonium, because pelargoniums were first discovered by John Tradescant at the Cape of Good Hope, South Africa in about 1660.

Now, once again, you all know what a geranium is, don't you? Incidentally, most seed catalogues contain some geranium seeds, often listed as 'Crane's bill'. If they are just listed as 'Geranium', they are almost certain to be pelargoniums.

*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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