

Reprint **Island Tides**

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

Reprint from Volume 2 Number 10

May 10, 1990

Wildflowers—Scarlet Pimpernel ~ Brenan Simpson



Photo: Brenan Simpson

In the King James Version of the New Testament, the First Letter of Peter is addressed to 'the strangers scattered throughout Pontus...' Pontus was a kingdom on the shore of the Black Sea which, until about sixty years before the birth of Christ, had been ruled for a long time by King Mithradites. When he was a young man, this king had a physician named Cratevas who, in addition to prescribing the normal herbal cures of the day, drew extremely accurate pictures of some of the plants which he used to create his remedies.

Pontus was eventually overrun by a Roman army which happened to have on its payroll its own physician, one Pedanius Dioscorides. This gentleman managed to lay hands on Cratevas' drawings and, when he later published a book on medical matters (*De Materia Medica*), he used them to illustrate it. Although there is now no trace of the original book, a copy of it made in 512 A. D. still exists in Vienna and there, amongst the various pages, is a drawing of a plant with the name '*Anagallis*', completely recognisable as the plant which we still know today as the *Anagallis arvensis*, or Scarlet Pimpernel.

Now the name 'Scarlet Pimpernel' is probably better known to many people as the title of a book about the French Revolution, written by Baroness Orczy, or of a film which occasionally turns up on the late show, but the plant itself actually grows wild here on the Gulf

Islands and is another of those European immigrants which have made this area their home.

This little annual herb sprawls along the ground and its half inch, five petalled flowers, salmon/red in colour, start to bloom in May. The small leaves, quite broad and coming to a point at the tips, grow in pairs opposite each other in a manner known as 'bipinnate'. It has been suggested that this particular leaf arrangement resulted in the small plant becoming known as the 'bipinnella' and this name certainly appears in old books, although applied to a different plant, a Burnet. Over the years, the spelling changed through 'pipinnella' and 'pimpinnella' to



Photo: Brenan Simpson

'pimpernell', which is how it is given in John Gerard's *Herball*, published in 1597, but by then applied to the same plant which carries that name today. According to Gerard, the pimpernel's 'juyce cures the toothach being snift up into the nosethrils'.

The latin name, *Anagallis*, is derived from the verb '*anagaleo*', meaning to make happy. If Doctor Cratevas used the juice to cure his royal patient's toothache, it should have made King Mithradites very happy indeed.

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

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

'This article was published (May 10, 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>