

Blackthorn

I was brought up in Wiltshire and spent some time living in west Berkshire. I have always felt drawn to the open downland of these places, and also always loved the beautiful hedges that can be found there. Hawthorn, blackthorn, hazel, buckthorn, privet, crabapple, dogwood, elderberry and viburnums provide the framework and these support brambles, old man's beard and roses. In autumn the feast of fruits and berries is dazzling especially when draped with the jewels of black and white bryony. Unfortunately we do not have hedges like this in Pembrokeshire (there are compensations - Berkshire is very short of puffins and choughs!). What we have, for better or worse, is Blackthorn.

Blackthorn is a hard plant to like. It has large hard spines which can inflict a painful wound which has a tendency to go septic. It produces suckers everywhere and especially where you don't want them. Even its often bountiful fruit is mouth-puckeringly sour. But let me try and make a case for it!

In April, the hedges are a-froth with blackthorn blossom well before any leaves have emerged providing the first welcome sign that spring is in its way. Some bushes are so densely clothed with flowers that you cannot see the stems at all - really just as good as any cherry or hawthorn. The season lasts for quite a long time as Blackthorn bushes are extremely variable and come into flower over a fortnight or so, providing pollen and nectar at a critical period. On the downside, however, the flowers are at their best when the weather is notoriously fickle and often very cold giving name to the "Blackthorn Winter" – a really nasty cold snap lest you begin to think that Spring had actually arrived!

And then the sloes – well of course they are the primary ingredient of sloe gin, adding an astringent bite to an otherwise rather sweet liqueur. And I have found another use for them. I used to make a jam called "Hedgerow Jam" – this is a mixture of crabapples, elderberries, blackberries, hazelnuts and sloes. This made a really interesting jam and the sloes were essential in order that it did not taste bland. However in true character they did not give away their fruit lightly as the flesh is very reluctant to part from the stone – you either had to precook them for ages and then rub them through a sieve to get the flesh off the stones, or put up with having stones in the jam or (labour of love) pare the flesh off the raw sloes before cooking (not so bad if the sloes are quite big).

And, of course, I almost forgot, blackthorn is the sole foodplant of the Black Hairstreak and Brown Hairstreak butterflies - but more about that next month!



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