

Tree of the Month December 2012 & January 2013: Glastonbury thorn (*Crataegus monogyna* 'Biflora')

On Dec 8, 2010, a sprig was cut from the Holy thorn, a 60-year old specimen of *Crataegus monogyna* 'Biflora' growing on Wearyall Hill in Glastonbury, England. This sprig was sent to the Queen, a Christmas tradition that may date back to the 16th century. Late that night, someone took a chainsaw up the hill, cut all the branches from the tree, and left them lying next to the stump. When the dismembered tree was discovered the next morning, the town was plunged into mourning. Locals gathered to hold ceremonies, pray, and watch in disbelief as police taped-off the area, gathering evidence.

The Holy thorn, or Glastonbury thorn, is a cultivar of common hawthorn that likely originated in the town of Glastonbury. It can grow to about 15 feet tall with a crown 30 feet wide. It is semi-evergreen, produces attractive red berries (haws), and unlike other hawthorns, it flowers twice a year, once near Easter (May), and again near Orthodox Christmas (January 5).

The origin story for this cultivar is part of the legend of Joseph of Arimathea, who was Jesus' uncle and is credited with introducing Christianity to Britain, as well as bringing the Holy Grail to England. While climbing Wearyall Hill, he planted his staff in the soil, where it miraculously took root and sprouted branches and leaves, becoming the first Glastonbury thorn.

The Holy thorn was first written about in the Middle Ages and attracted many visitors to Glastonbury near Christmas time. In the 1640s, this tree was cut down by Cromwell's Protestant troops during the English Civil War as an object of superstition and nature worship. Cuttings were taken of the felled tree and grown in secret at Glastonbury Abbey and other local churches, and have since been propagated many times. Gardeners at the Abbey discovered that *Crataegus monogyna* 'Biflora' cannot be grown from seeds or direct cuttings. It loses the 'twice-flowering' characteristic unless it is grafted onto rootstock, usually common hawthorn.

In 1951, during the Festival of Britain - a nation-wide celebration held to boost the population's spirits after the horrors of the Second World War - a young 'Biflora' was planted on Wearyall Hill to replace the one that was lost in the 17th century. The tree became an important community symbol, the centre of many celebrations and ceremonies, and brought pilgrims and tourists from all over the world. This is the tree that was cut down in December, 2010.

It will take more than vandalism, however, to destroy the Glastonbury thorn. After the 2010 incident, Kew arborists took cuttings from the severed branches back to their greenhouses for grafting and propagation. The grafted scions will all eventually be returned to the community. In the spring of 2011, a new little Glastonbury thorn was planted next to the remains of the old tree on Wearyall Hill as a replacement.

Glastonbury thorns grow in a number of gardens around the world, including the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, in England, New York Botanical Garden and Central Park in the USA, and here at VanDusen Botanical Garden in Vancouver. The Glastonbury thorn in our collection, which came from Dulford Nurseries in Devon, England, is dedicated to VanDusen's original Curator and Garden Director, R. Roy Forster, O.C. and is possibly descended from a tree that grew in Glastonbury Abbey. Staff and visitors will be watching in late December or early January for its little white flowers to make an appearance.