

WEEKLY UPDATE – MAY 8 - MAY 13, 2015

Another May Flower

The hawthorn tree (*Crataegus monogyna*), known as the May-tree or the faery tree, is also associated with the merry month of May. It signifies hope and supreme happiness. In the language of flowers the gift of a hawthorn sprig says only the best is desired for the recipient.

“Mark the fair blooming of the hawthorn tree,
Who, finely clothed in a robe of white,
Fills full the wanton eye with May’s delight.”

Attributed to Geoffrey Chaucer

Hawthorns provide food and shelter for many species of birds and mammals; the flowers are important for nectar-feeding insects. In many countries, the haws, which are the fruits of the various species of hawthorn, are used to make jams, jellies, juices and alcoholic beverages.

The dried fruits of several hawthorn species have been used in traditional medicine; in both naturopathic and traditional Chinese medicine, it is used as a digestive aid and in herbal medicine to strengthen cardiac function. In Western evidence-based medicine, research suggests that hawthorn may be useful in treating cardiovascular disease such as chronic heart failure.

There is an abundance of rich folklore around the hawthorn plant. The original Maypoles were made of hawthorn. In Gaelic folklore, hawthorn is associated with fairies, while in Serbian and Croatian folklore, a stake made from hawthorn is said to be deadly to vampires.

It is considered very unlucky to cut the tree except when it is in bloom. The bad luck and ultimate failure of the Delorean Motor Company is attributed to the destruction of a faery thorn to make way for a production facility!

The Glastonbury Thorn (*Crataegus monogyna* ‘Biflora’) is a form of Common Hawthorn; it flowers twice a year and can be found in VanDusen Garden by the grasses in Bed 35A(1). It is associated with legends about Joseph of Arimathea and the arrival of Christianity in England. You can read more about the legend and the history of the Holy thorn in [VanDusen Garden’s “Tree of the Month”](#) for December 2012/January 2013 as well as in Roy Forster’s book, *For the Love of Trees: An Arboreal Odyssey*.

The original Glastonbury Thorn was cut down and burned as a relic of superstition by Oliver Cromwell’s Roundheads during the English Civil War. As recently as 2010, deliberate damage was done to a 1951 specimen and subsequent new shoots would mysteriously disappear as they emerged.

At Christmas it is supposedly a custom to send a sprig of Glastonbury Thorn flowers to the ruling monarch to decorate the royal family's Christmas table.

Plant Highlight - Tree Peonies (*Paeonia suffruticosa*)

The hybrid tree peonies or moutan are in glorious bloom right now in Bed 141 below the Korean Pavilion. The tree peony, although originally from China, is also revered in Japan where it is known as the "King of Flowers". It is an emblem of prosperity, good fortune, honor, daring and masculine bravery. Like the maple tree and cherry blossoms, it is a favourite subject in art and poetry, especially in the Japanese haiku form.

On all sides
the peony wards off
rainclouds
Buson, 1716-1783

The god of fortune
and luck dwells here
a peony
Issa 1763-1827

And my favourite!

The peony is this big!
The child's arms
Outstretched
Issa

The root bark (mu dan pi) of the tree peony is used in traditional Chinese medicine to clear heat from the body and cool the blood, among other things.

Due to overharvesting, the wild plant is threatened with extinction.

"What potent blood hath modest May."
Ralph Waldo Emerson