

Godmanchester Garden Club Newsletter

January 2025



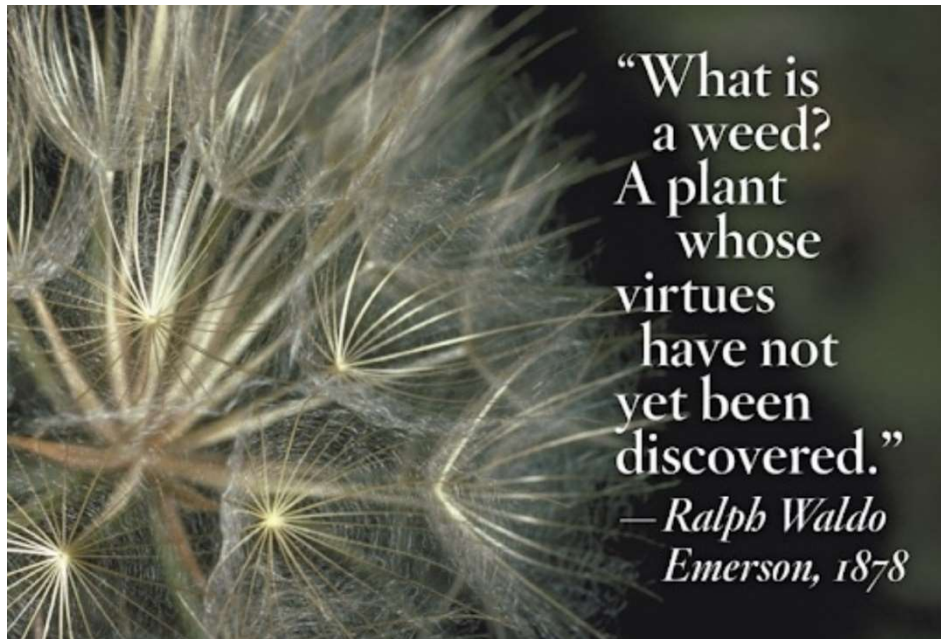
News from No. 10

On the first Saturday in January, we visited Angelsey Abbey to see the bears 'hiding' in the grounds! It was a crisp frosty morning and we began our search in the winter garden. We enjoyed the pops of colour of the tiny cyclamen (above) and the scent of the witch-hazel (below right). There were a few early snowdrops in sheltered corners too and a few over-optimistic daffodils looking *very* sorry for themselves!



**Happy Gardening,
Sue**





Kingsley Lawrence: Plantain: gardeners' friend or foe

Kingsley began by quoting Ralph Waldo Emerson: “What is a weed? A plant whose virtues have never been discovered.”

He first explained what plant taxonomy is: “Plant taxonomy is the science that finds, identifies, describes, classifies, and names plants. It is one of the main branches of taxonomy. Plant taxonomy is closely allied to plant systematics, and there is no sharp boundary between the two. *Wikipedia*” and how it helps with grouping and identifying plants, as well as how hybrids develop.

Plantain belongs to the plant family Plantaginaceae, and *Plantago* is a genus of about 200 species of flowering plants. The name comes from the Latin “*planta*” meaning the sole of the foot. (As those who have suffered with plantar fasciitis know!)

Plantains have many attributes: it is an important food source for some caterpillars, has a long history of use as a herbal medicine, as an anti-ulcerative, anti-inflammatory, antibiotic and wound healer, and the leaves and flower stems are used as food.



Kingsley went on to talk about the three different plantains he had found in and around Godmanchester. We were entertained and challenged when he asked us to describe the shapes of plant leaves, and identify the plant they belonged to, and the variations of shapes on the leaf margins, all of which helped in identifying the different plantains in Gmc: *plantago major* (Left), *plantago lanceolata* (Right) and *plantago ***?! (Can you remember?)*



The different plants had some similarities, such as a rosette of leaves at the base and a flower spike of about 25-30 centimetres.

Kingsley also showed us *Plantago maritima* subs. *maritima*, known as “Goose tongue”, which he had seen growing in Cornwall. “Erba Stella” is an edible variety of this plantain, well-known in Italy and available to buy as seeds. It is also known as *Plantago coronopus* or “Buck’s horn plantain” (Below left and right). If you decide to buy the seed and try growing and cooking it, please let us know!



We saw photos of other types of plantain: *Plantago media* (hoary plantain), *Plantago rubrifolia*, with decorative red leaves, and *Plantago rugelii*. Some of these plantains would look good in a wild flower meadow. K had used some plantain plants in a living picture, in a large picture frame. He explained how he made these pictures and the plants he used. They were on display in the Town Show, with his beautiful flower arrangements and carved wooden spoons. We may have a chance to admire Kingsley's horticultural skills during the next Open Gardens.



It was a stimulating, informative and fun evening, with a plantsman who explained his fascination for these plants and the methods he used to identify them well, encouraging us to look more closely at plants we might consider weeds. After all, many of our garden plants started off as specimens of wild plants, brought back by plant hunters, from which new varieties were bred.

Josephine



Annie Wilson sent in this lovely photo of her back garden, taken last Sunday morning – very frosty but when the sun peeped through, it was beautiful with the pinkish tones in the trees and on the roof tops. The sedums (*hylothelephium*) keep on giving too!

“...the pretty pink one!”

After Kingley’s informative and inspirational talk, many wanted to know where we can buy these plants – especially the pretty pink one! I have done some ‘Googleing’, initially to obtain photos to illustrate the talk, and this is what I found!

See chilternseeds.co.uk they sell

Hoary Plantain, Lamb's Tongue – *Plantago media*

“A native wild flower, this particular species is alone among the British members of the genus in being insect, not wind-pollinated. As might be expected, therefore, the flowers have, from a



horticultural view, more to offer. Inspection will reveal beautiful and delicate lilac-coloured stamens which, together with the perhaps hitherto unsuspected perfume, make for a surprisingly attractive flower which bees love. 1½ft (45cm)”

They also sell – **Bucks Horn plantain, minutina or erba stella – *Plantago coronopus***

See info@incrediblevegetables.co.uk they sell

Red plantain – *Plantago major* (Packs of 100 seeds)

“Red plantain – *Plantago major* Plantain is an underrated and wonderful perennial vegetable sometimes known as ‘**Rubrifolia**’. Young leaves can be eaten in salads, soups or stir fries, older leaves can be boiled and eaten. They can also be dried for using later on and the seeds are edible too. It is also a medicinal and highly nutritious plant packed with vitamins and minerals. Space plants about 20-30cm apart in sun or part shade. It will gently self-sow in your garden, so you will have it around for a long time. Plants are herbaceous, so will go dormant over the winter and re-emerge in the spring.”



Bucks Horn plantain – *Plantago coronopus* (packs of 150 seeds)

“A useful short-lived perennial and self-sowing leafy salad plant which is very resilient and easy to grow. An important ingredient in Tuscan salads. Great for a polyculture space.



Bucks Horn plantain – *Plantago coronopus* also known in Italy as ‘*minutina*’ or ‘*erba stella*’ (star grass) is usually a biennial, sometimes short-lived perennial plant which is a useful low maintenance self-sower in the garden and provides welcome greens for autumn / winter salads. It forms rosettes of green toothed leaves that give the plant its name as they resemble deer antlers. It is frost hardy and can be grown outside, or undercover for more tender leaves and will thrive in most soils. In Italy, Buck’s Horn Plantain is an important ingredient for Tuscan salads. It can be eaten raw as well as cooked and has a fine, slightly bitter taste.”

Sea plantain – *Plantago maritima* (sold as potted plant, awaiting stock)

“An underrated and wonderful hardy herbaceous perennial vegetable. Nutritious young leaves can be eaten raw or cooked and sometimes pickled.”



See justseeds.com they sell



**Ribwort plantain, lance leaf
plantain - *Plantago
lanceolata***

“A low-growing herbaceous perennial with a long tap root and rosettes of ribbed green leaves, which are flatter and more rounded in short turf, but longer and more upright in meadows and grasslands.

Produces leafless spikes to 8cm high of small, tightly clustered brown flowers with creamy white anthers, throughout the summer. Prefers well-drained soil and open, sunny positions but grows well in all but the most acidic soil. Sometimes considered a weed in gardens, although the seeds can provide winter food for songbirds so it is sometimes used in wildflower planting. Remove before flowering to prevent spread.”

They also sell – **Hoary Plantain, Lamb's
Tongue – *Plantago media***

Another website suggested that *Plantago lanceolata* is a good source of nutrition for tortoises! Time to stop getting distracted!!

Sue Cook

Right, another photo of *Plantago media*!



Godmanchester Garden Club - Programme 2025

13/01/25: Kingsley Lawrence: Plantain: gardeners' friend or foe?

10/02/25: Rosemary Buisseret: The Night-scented Garden

10/03/25: Members meeting: seeds, seedlings, cuttings and plant swap. Demonstrations of useful skills for the gardener

14/04/25: Russell Attwood: No Dig Gardening

12/05/25: Dr Richard Binks: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly. A garden guide to insects

June: Trip to local gardens

July: Garden Party

August: No Meeting

08/09/25: Members Meeting: A chance to talk about and recommend gardens we have visited over the summer

13/10/25: Froggery Cottage "Penstemons"

10/11/25: to be confirmed

December: Christmas Party

