

Hedgerow Fruiting Treasures

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At this time of the year, gardeners look forward to the rich autumn colours of their garden trees and shrubs, and to the fruits which they bear. But the fruits and colour are often ignored on our native hedgerow plants simply because we take them for granted. Their leaves and fruits are every bit as valuable as their non-native garden centre offerings and because they are native they can be relied upon to survive and perform in our local conditions.

The humble Hawthorn, *Crataegus monogyna*, is absolutely laden with red berries most years and provide a good source of food for the local birds. The white blossom in spring is another of its assets and if it was rare and grew in the Himalayas everyone would be clamouring for it. As it is we rarely cast it a glance. Another wonderful berrying shrub is the Guelder Rose (stupid name as it is not a rose at all), *Viburnum opulus*, which at this time of year is covered in clusters of almost translucent red fruits which dangle from every stem. Birds seem to leave these fruits alone until everything else has been consumed, so the effect is long lasting. The leaves of this shrub change from green to a soft orange in September which enhances the overall effect of this easily grown native.

Gin drinkers often wax lyrical about Sloe Gin, but fail to notice the glaucous blue fruits on the native Blackthorn from which the taste is derived. Blackthorn, *Prunus spinosa*, is looked upon as a bit of a nuisance by farmers as it can run by suckering, but the white clouds of blossom in Spring and the showy fruits in autumn make it a valuable contributor to the British landscape. It is also the food plant of the rare Brown Hairstreak butterfly, the eggs of which we have found in our meadow hedgerow. In August 2016, I was lucky enough to find a freshly emerged female specimen drying its wings before flying off, but not before I took her photograph.

Elder, *Sambucus nigra*, is another rather thuggish British native, but much loved by home brewers for the flowers from which Elderflower cordial can be made and for the bunches of small shiny berries which can be turned into elderberry wine.

Although it is not a British native, the Snowberry, *Symphoricarpos albus*, has spread widely since its introduction in the early 1800's. Its tiny pink flowers in spring are hardly noticed, but give way to Mint Imperial sized white fruits in the Autumn, much loved by blackbirds in a hard winter. They are apparently known as 'lardy balls' in Wiltshire.

The hedgerow fruits of the native Dog Rose are plump and showy and I remember when I was very young that my mother used to administer spoonfuls of rose hip syrup to me and my twin sister, telling us that it would prevent colds and give us a good dose of Vitamin C. It came in little bottles and it was not until many years later that I realised it was derived from the fruit of the wild rose, the hip. As a youngster I always looked upon rose as a colour and hip as a part of the body, so instead of seeing this syrup as a source of Vitamin C, I looked upon it as a cure for a rose coloured hip - such innocent days.