

## MADRYN'S MILLEFLEURS

### MEADOWSWEET

*Filipendula ulmaria*

*"Let us seek, thou and I , by the magic of enchantment to conjure a wife...out of flowers...And then they took the flowers of the oak, and the flowers of the broom and the flowers of the meadowsweet, and from those they called forth the very fairest and best endowed maiden that mortal ever saw...and named her Blodeuedd..." Translated from The Mabinogion 1300-1325*

I first encountered meadowsweet as a mesmerised 11 year old, reading the wonderful children's tale "The Owl Service" by Alan Garner. In this mystical story, three contemporary teenagers holidaying in the Welsh mountains are bound into an ancient legend of the Mabinogion, the 11th century Celtic story of Blodeuedd, a woman conjured out of flowers, and given in marriage to a man she did not love. When she fell in love with another man, for whom she was not intended, she betrayed her husband. Husband and lover were then set against each other, resulting in both their deaths. As punishment, the wizard who had made Blodeuedd turned her into an owl, *"And because of the dishonour thou hast done to {thy husband} thou art never to dare show thy face in the light of day...there {shall} be emnity between thee and all birds...thou {shall} be forever called Blodeuedd"* Translated from the Mabinogion. In parts of Wales the owl is still known as Blodeuedd to this day.

Throughout the Owl Service novel which held me so transfixed all those years ago, meadowsweet is a predominant feature, both by colouring the landscape in which the story unfolds, and in the conjuring of the beautiful Blodeuedd for her lord. Thus my interest in this truly delightful herb was sparked very early in life.

Meadowsweet is certainly beautiful, and one could imagine it would help to create a lovely maiden indeed. A herbaceous perennial, in nature populating water meadows and stream sides of Britain, it is both a lovely and a useful herb for the medieval gardener. Medieval herbalist Gerard describes meadowsweet as "delighting the senses" . Culpeper describes "mead-sweet" as "many tufts of small, white flowers, thrust thick together...smell[ing] sweet". Known also as Queen of the Meadows, it was a favourite strewing herb of Elizabeth I, and it was so much in demand for strewing at weddings and the making of bridal garlands, it became known as Bridewort. This plant was also prized by the Druids as one of the most sacred of all herbs. In early summer the low to medium sized, dark green rosette of deeply wrinkled, maple shaped leaves sends up tall spires of flower to around 1.2metres in height, creamy white, frothy, and a striking feature which lasts for some weeks. As autumn flows into winter, meadowsweet dies down and becomes dormant, before re-shooting in spring, so do not be tempted into thinking it is dead and pulling it out. Meadowsweet is a long lived herb, and

will enhance your garden year after year if given rich soil in full sun, and ample water.

Beautiful though it is, its fragrance and decorative potential are outshone by its virtues as a medicinal plant, which are many. Meadowsweet was the first discovered source of salicylic acid, isolated in 1838 and later synthesised as the first aspirin, and leaves and flowers can be steeped as a simple (a single herb steeped in boiling water to make a tea) to produce a gentle anti-inflammatory and painkiller. Most effective perhaps to soothe stomach upsets and to ease vomiting and nausea, it here it operates with its most stunning efficacy. I write from personal experience that meadowsweet is the most effective anti-nausea agent I have used, far outstripping synthetic anti-nausea prescription drugs. It is invaluable if sipped as a tea during illness. For this reason is it frequently recommended by herbalists today for morning sickness during pregnancy, or as a safe remedy for children's stomach upsets. It acts to protect and soothe the mucous membranes of the digestive tract, and is an effective remedy for both vomiting and diarrhoea. Its mild sedative action also calms the emotional distress of severe stomach upsets and allows sleep.

In the kitchen, meadowsweet can be used to flavour herbal beers and wines, and flowers impart a sweet almond flavour to jams and stewed fruit.

To make meadowsweet beer, boil 50g each of meadowsweet, betony, raspberry leaves and agrimony in 9 litres of water for 15 minutes, strain and add 900g white sugar, stirring until dissolved. Bottle when nearly cool.

It is also useful as a dyeing herb, leaves and stems yielding a blue dye, roots a black dye, and flowers a greenish yellow dye.

There are several varieties and cultivars of meadowsweet, including both single (superior almond scent) and double flowers, a golden leafed form (aurea), and a rare giant form for truly spectacular display. Meadowsweet is readily propagated from root division, and can also be grown from harvested seed. Dried meadowsweet is available from Goulds Chemist to keep on hand for tummy upsets, and started plants are available from Island Herbs.

Meadowsweet offers beauty, history, legend, flavouring, dyes, and above all a truly indispensable medicine.

I simply would not be without this herb. If you would have only one plant in your garden, this is the one.

References : Complete Book of Herbs, Lesley Bremness; The Owl Service, Alan Garner; The Mabinogion, Translated by Gwyn Jones; Holistic Herbal, David Hoffman; Culpeper's Herbal