FLAX FLOWER *Linum usitatissimum*

Few in the Barony of Ynys Fawr would not own a linen garment. Modern linen is beautiful, comfortable, durable and elegant, and has remained a popular fabric for high end fashion for many centuries. During the middle ages, when fabric range was very limited, linen was a frequent choice for all levels of society, and the growing of flax for the production of fabric was widespread throughout Britain and Europe.

But perhaps, when we step into a modern health food store, and buy a packet of linseed to add to our museli, we might fail to realise that within each seed is the potential for a tunic or gown, from royal majesty through to the lowliest peasant.

In medieval Britain and Europe, gathering and processing linen fibre was an industrial scale operation, and provided a great deal of seasonal employment throughout the areas where it was grown commercially. Flax was harvested for fibre production at the flowering stage, and was sheaved and removed from the fields into processing areas. There, the fiberous stems were soaked in water, and broken down their full length using a simple but ingenious wooden fibre breaker, similar in appearance to a wooden saw-horse, but with a moveable lever arm, brought down to crush the stems, which were laid across the "horse". These fibre breakers can still be seen occassionally, just sitting in the street, in unspoiled medieval villages in England's west country, and in rural Switzerland. Once broken, the outer stem covering was removed, leaving the inner fibre exposed. The soaked, broken and stripped flax fibre becomes very blonde in colour, silky and glossy in appearance, and has given rise to the term "flaxen haired'. It does indeed give the appearance of long, silky, blonde hair, and is quite lovely to look upon and handle. The long, shining fibres were then spun and woven to create linen fabric.

I first beheld flax flowers when wandering through my favourite herb nursery, and was very drawn to the soft, blue starry flowers, much paler and more delicate than hearty borage, swaying atop tall, wirey stems, high above the pots in which they grew. They are intensely graceful and ethereal - fairy flowers of fragile lovliness, belying their extreme durability and hidden strength. I was intrigued to discover that this seemingly frail beauty was the very same plant that produced linen fabric, and determined to experiement further at Wildwood.

Flax flower is an annual, that is to say, it grows from seed to flower and forms seeds of it's own within one year. After forming fresh seed, it hangs it's lovely head, and dies, scattering it's progeny to germinate anew the following spring. Flax seed, usually called linseed, is very easily obtained - indeed, I was able to secure an almost unlimited supply just from rummaging in my own pantry at Wildwood. As long as the seed is relatively fresh, it will have a high rate of viability, and a handful will be sufficient to make a pretty and airy display in summer gardens.

As with all annuals, considered preparation will yield the best results. Flax flower does enjoy rich soils, but it is a hungry crop, and had a reputation in the middle ages of depleting rich soils and rendering them poor. Thus many a farmer, when growing on a commercial scale, was forced to change fields each season in order to maintain a sufficiently productive yield. The addition of animal manures, compost and blood and bone will certainly improve results in the home garden. Once the area is prepared, it is a simple matter of scattering seed, at the rate of one handful to the square metre, before gently raking over, and watering in with a fine hose or watering can. As the flax flower blooms in high summer, seed must be planted out in early spring. If soil moisture level is retained, the seedlings will quickly grow to around 1 metre in height, and produce a pale blue or occassionally white fairy garden within 3 months, to delight the eye of the linen-garbed anachronist. The display will last for 2 or three weeks at it's peak, before one by one, the flowers fade and swell to produce seed. Flax blooms concurrently with a number of other summer herbs, and can add height and valuable blue colour to the herb garden if planted with this in mind. In addition, it has the added advantage of lasting well in the vase, and makes a pleasing cut flower.

There are a number of varieties of Flax which grow wild throughout Europe - *Linum bienne* or Pale Flax, similar in appearance to cultivated flax, but with a more wiry stem, *Linum perenne*, Perennial Flax, with a dark blue flower, and *Linum catharticum*, or Fairy Flax, with all white flowers and thread-like stalks. All these varieties can still be found growing wild throughout the British Isles, as can the now commercial *Linum usitatissimum,* the Cultivated Flax*..*

While flax was invaluable for fibre production, the seed itself had many uses in the middle ages, and this remains so today. In the southern hemisphere, ripe seed is collected in March, when the swollen pods have dried, and contain up to 40% oils, including linoleic, linolenic, and oleic acids, mucilage and protein.

Modern herbalists employ linseed in the treatment of pulmonary infections, particularly bronchitis, as a gentle laxative, and as a soothing emollient treatment for boils, scabies, and other skin troubles. Cold pressed linseed oil is also becoming a popular health supplement, a vegetarian alternative to fish oils, taken by many as an anti-inflammatory for arthritis pain, heart health, and hormonal balance. Both seeds and oil are recommended for the natural management of pre-menstrual syndrome, peri-menopause and menopause, and a tablespoon of fresh seed sprinkled on cereal, or baked in breads or biscuits can be of benefit in controlling symptoms. Linseed oil is a valuable ingredient in a variety of skin creams and beauty treatments, and has an anti-inflammatory as well as moisturising action. It can also be used as a setting lotion for hair.

Outdoors, both seed and oil are a valuable source of livestock feed supplement, and linseed oil has for centuries been used as a timber treatment to prolong the

life of wooden structures. It remains an ingredient in many modern oil based paints today.

This ancient, airy beauty has been an invaluable source of food, fibre, stock feed, and timber preservative for the last millenium, yet it remains a pretty garden flower, easy to grow, a joy to behold, and with a fascinating history to enchant the anachronist. Surely, it is a worthy plant for both the medieval and the contemporary gardener.

YIS
Lady Madryn of Wildwood

References:- *Holistic Herbal*, David Hoffman, *Complete Herbal*, Lesley Bremness, *Wildflowers of Britain & Ireland*, Blamey, Fitter & Fitter, Burgdorf Castle & Museum, Burgdorf, Switzerland