

“White Water Lilly” (*Nymphaea alba*)

This handsome flower is known by a variety of names throughout the Celtic regions, such as Duilleagbhaite bhan (the white leaf of drowning), Ruamalach (beacon or warning), and Bobbins. It is found in still or slow moving water, where its large petals float in the current.

The roots of this lily contain tannins that have long been used to produce a black or dark grey ink. The roots have also been used extensively in a variety of folk medicines. A tea was often made from the plant that was used to combat kidney and bladder problems.

There is also a small, torn note in the Argyll papers at Inverary Castle that tells how the roots of this lily were cut and then boiled in vinegar. This concoction was then applied to corns for three days in an effort to remove them.



“Heather” (*Calluna vulgaris*)

The legends and tales surrounding this plant could easily fill several books, as could instructions for the wide variety of uses to which it has been put. The heather has yielded up highly resilient dyes; extremely strong rope commonly used for thatching; a bedding material that retains its shape and provides a lovely scent; and a variety of folk remedies. White heather is often worn as a symbol of good luck in many Celtic regions – although in some parts of Scotland the white flower is considered *bad* luck. Many feel that the white heather is lucky because it escaped a terrible battle, which stained the majority of the heather red with blood, although each tale tends to have a different idea on whose blood was spilled.


Heather has also been long used as a prime ingredient in an amazing beer. The flowers are boiled, strained, and added to a mixture of golden syrup, hops, yeast, and other ingredients. In fact, recent evidence at a Neolithic site on the Hebridean island of Rum indicates heather beer may have been brewed back then, making it one of the oldest drinks around!



“Pansy” (*Viola spp*)

A wide variety of pansies abound in Celtic regions, but the Mountain Pansy is perhaps the most wide-spread, appearing along the hills and cliffs of Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. In many areas the pansy is also known as the “Heartsease”. The origin of this nickname is a bit clouded. Many believe it was started because the pansy was a popular flower of early herbalists, being used in potions to combat diseases associated with the heart. Others believe the name arose because the varied colors of pansies scattered across the field brought a special smile to the face of lonely lovers, thereby bringing them ease while they were separated from one another. This flower was also used by the Celts to brew a love potion.

Another old Celtic tale tells the story of how the pansy came to have very little scent. At one time it was the most fragrant of flowers. People came from all over to pick it, churning up the fields and frightening the livestock. The pansy saw the people were beginning to grow hungry, so it voluntarily gave up its lovely aroma to save the land for planting and herding.



“St. John’s Wort” (*Hypericum spp*)

There are actually many different types of this plant, which has recently become popular as an herbal treatment for mild depression. While the name implies a connection with Saint John the Baptist, this is a fairly recent development.

The ancient Celts used this plant in their Summer Solstice festivals. One way in which they used it was in divination, or telling the future. As their traditions were slowly subsumed with the advent of Christianity, the plant was renamed and was used to celebrate Saint John’s birthday – which coincidentally enough was said to be June 24. Pretty close to the Summer Solstice, wouldn’t you say?

In addition to being a symbol of summer, various parts of this plant were used in ancient medicines as cures for ailments ranging from tremors to battle wounds. Its yellow flowers were also used as a charm to ward off evil spirits.



“Iris” (*Iridaceae spp*)

The majestic Yellow Iris is found in great numbers on the Hebrides, where it is one of the favorite haunts for the elusive bird, the corncrake. Several other types of iris are found throughout all the Celtic regions.

As with many other plants that have three primary petals, the iris was viewed as a sacred plant by the early Celts, illustrating the trinity aspect of their primary goddess, Brigid. With the advent of Christianity, the early church changed this symbolism and the iris became a chief flower of Mary.

An additional aspect of the flower which lent itself to symbolic treatment is the sword-shaped petals. Ancient designs have been found showing it was used as a heraldic device for thousands of years in different cultures, eventually becoming the famous symbol of France, the Fleur-de-lis.



“Wild Basil” (*Calamintha Clinopodium*)

This straggling, leggy plant is quite common in Scotland and Wales, although somewhat more rare in Ireland. It has a rather thyme-like scent and has long been used in cooking to liven up an otherwise dull recipe.

Aside from its many uses in culinary traditions, the spell-binding scent of Wild Basil has long made it a favorite aromatic herb. Spreading basil leaves about your house is an old technique for keeping out evil spirits, ghosts, goblins, and just plain bad feelings. It was often gathered into small bundles and hung in the kitchen, where it would protect the families' food. (Not to mention, it would be pretty close at hand so you could cut off a few leaves for your soup.)

Wild Basil has also played a role in many tinctures, including one that supposedly aided with digestion. I imagine so...a little basil would help just about anything to go down well....



“Chamomile” (*Anthemis Nobilis*)

In Scotland it is known as *athair talamh*, or “Father of the Ground”. It was considered a sort of “plant doctor” and it was believed that if you planted Chamomile near a plant that was unhealthy the sick plant would soon perk up. People also noticed that flies tend to stay away from Chamomile, so the flowers were considered a good deterrent for evil spirits.

The idea of a calming cuppa of Chamomile tea also goes way, way back. This plant has long been revered for its relaxing qualities and was believed to ensure a restful night’s sleep devoid of nightmares. Tinctures of Chamomile were also used by the ancient Celts to heal wounds, relieve pain, and bring comfort to swollen joints.

Due to its slightly apple-like scent, the Druids associated this plant with the sun and other life-giving forces. It therefore figured prominently in their traditions and festivals as a symbol of prosperity and life.



“Cinquefoil” (*Potentilla reptans*)

Regarded as a sign of spring, the Cinquefoil (or Five Fingered Grass as it is known in most Celtic regions) was used in Druidic ceremonies on the Vernal Equinox to welcome the new season. Celtic people also used to cook and eat the roots of the plant, as well as use the leaves as a salad green.

Five Fingered Grass is high in tannins, and therefore is quite astringent. It has long been mixed with honey and used as a reliever of sore throats and coughs. Some ancient recipes list it as a key ingredient in concoctions to battle infections and rash as well.

Due to its “five fingered” arrangement, this plant also has a long association with witches, and is often mentioned in connection with various spells and magical potions – including one that will allow you to fly.