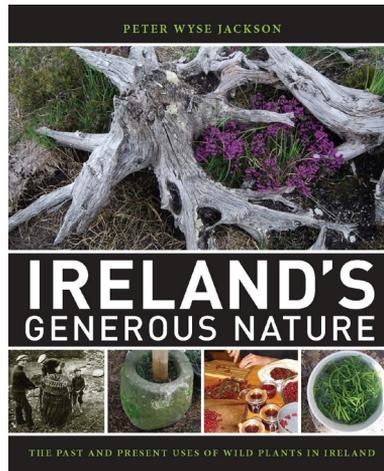


Ireland's Generous Nature – the Past and Present Uses of Wild Plants in Ireland

Peter Wyse Jackson. Missouri Botanic Garden Press. 2014.
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Ireland's Generous Nature is the first comprehensive account of the historical and present-day uses of wild plant species in Ireland. It records a wealth of traditional knowledge about Irish plant use, knowledge that has been disappearing fast. More than 1,500 wild plants are detailed in a systematic list, which gives both their Irish and English names. Many historical references from a wide range of Irish literature have been included. In this lively and scholarly book, Professor Wyse Jackson shows how plants were used in virtually every aspect of life in Ireland; food, clothes, medicine, construction, beverages, veterinary medicine, human health and beauty, and even death. The book is richly illustrated with photographs, as well as botanical paintings by the Irish artist, Lydia Shackleton (1828–1914).

The blending of scientific and historic facts with myths, superstition, folklore and personally tested recipes, produces an unrivalled account of the rich heritage of Irish plants. Needless to say, of particular interest to foresters is the information on the uses of different woods throughout the ages and such a reader will not be disappointed. There is a fascinating account of trees and timber used in construction and handicrafts together with the use of timber for musical instruments. He lists the woods used in different parts of the Irish harp. His analysis of the trees used in the tanning of leather is enthralling. He devotes a chapter to basketry, which was a very important activity in the pre plastic era. Today, most baskets are imported from south-east Asia and now most of us would struggle to make a simple item with hazel, willow or straw.

Our ancestors possessed a remarkable knowledge of the medicinal uses of plants, including trees. For example, willow was used to cure aches and pains, ash for anti-inflammatory purposes, elder and ivy for bronchitis. He also mentions oak as a cure for diarrhoea, together with cherry and juniper which alleviate flatulence! He also lists the plants that are used to treat animals. Plants including trees were used as dyes and were also used to make ropes. It is very easy to forget how dependant our ancestors were on the plants that grew in their locality. The author believes that the famine played a part in the demise of the use of local flora. In a similar way it created a stigma among the poor about collecting shell fish which in parts of the west is still called “famine food”, although it has long been a highly prized delicacy in expensive restaurants. Today, there is a resurgence of interest in foraging and it is now regarded as a very fashionable pursuit.

Peter Wyse Jackson is the current President and Director of the Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis and the George Engelmann Professor of Botany at Washington University, St Louis. He formerly held positions as Secretary General of Botanic Gardens Conservation International, based at Kew in London. He was Director of the National Botanic Gardens in Glasnevin, before moving to his present position in 2010. He has published widely on Irish botany, botanic gardens and plant conservation.

Overall, this book is a stimulating read and the author promises a second edition on this important subject that has been neglected for generations.



Watercolour of Prunus spinosa L. (blackthorn, sloe) by Lydia Shackleton. Courtesy of the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin. Ireland's Generous Nature is published by the Missouri Botanical Gardens Press.

John Mc Loughlin is Business Editor of the Society of Irish Foresters and Chairman of the Tree Register of Ireland.