

## Christian Customs



Plants play or played a central role in many church ceremonies such as the rush-bearing ceremonies of Northern England, or the less well known 'dressing down of the aspen' ceremony on Loch Shiel. Many traditional associations between plants and the Bible survive today such as the connection between Judas Iscariot and the elder tree, and the willow leaves used in place of palms on Palm Sunday.

Biblical images including plants have long been an integral part of Western artistic traditions, including the art of illuminated manuscripts, the Biblical scenes of 16 & 17<sup>th</sup> century embroideries, Renaissance paintings, and church architecture.

Herb strewing to make church flooring is a very old tradition in Britain and is still carried on in parts of England in the rush-bearing festivals. Other herbs used included sweet flag (*Acorus calamus*), meadowsweet, and mugwort. Many trees, including aspen, birch, elder and willow have cultural associations with the Bible in Britain.

May is the month associated with the Virgin Mary and in many parts of Europe there are still wild flower ceremonies during this month, such as the forget-me-not wreaths in Slovenia.

There are many wild plant customs associated with St Brigid's Eve (January), May Eve and Midsummer Eve or St John's Eve. These include the making of rush cross for St Brigid, and the making of chaplets from mugwort and St John's Wort at Midsummer.



## Biblical Art

Wild plants have long been part of Biblical artistic traditions, such as the wide range of flowers in illuminated manuscripts (Fisher 2004), and the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century embroideries of Biblical subjects. Often these embroideries use highly stylised images copied from pattern books but occasionally a very British plant like the bluebell will turn up in the Garden of Eden (<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/64.101.1284>) Depictions of the Garden of Eden and many other Biblical subjects are rich sources for the changes in the depiction of wild plants in art across time.

### References & Online Resources:

Eland, S Plant Lives Website ([www.plantlives.com](http://www.plantlives.com))

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Mac Coitir N. & Langrishe G., 2006, Irish Wild Plants - Myths, Legends and Folklore

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Mabey, R, 1998, Flora Britannica

Milliken W. & Bridgewater S., 2004, Flora Celtica

### *A short list of some of the wild plants associated with Christian customs and festivals in Britain*

**Aspen** (*Populus tremuloides*) - The leaves tremble in shame because its wood was used to make the cross. It is recorded that an old aspen in Loch Shiel was visited by local people every Good Friday for a dressing down (Flora Celtica). The aspen was also called 'Eabh - Eve' in Gaelic.

**Birch** (*Betula pendula*) - It is one tradition that the branches used to beat Christ were made of birch, and the dwarf birch (*Betula nana*) was small in memory of its use in this manner. The birch was also associated with protection and decorating churches with birches around Whitsun was another tradition, as was the beating of boys with birch sticks at the Feast of the Innocents (28<sup>th</sup> December)

**Bog Myrtle** (*Myrica gale*) - Used for palms on Palm Sunday in some parts of Ireland

**Elder** (*Sambucus nigra*) - Judas in some traditions hanged himself from an elder



**Foxglove** (*Digitalis purpurea*) - St Nectan - 6<sup>th</sup> century saint in Devon & Cornwall - there is a tradition that St Nectan's head was cut off & the drops of blood became foxgloves

**Fern**— Supposed to be able to be gathered on St John's Eve (Midsummer) and had magical qualities

**Hawthorn** (*Crataegus monogyna*) - The Glastonbury Thorn is supposed to blossom twice in the same year and is associated with Joseph of Arimathea and the arrival of Christianity in Britain

**Nettle** (*Urtica dioica*) - Ireland - St Colmcille survived on nettle broth; St Brigid changed nettles into butter and bark into food to feed a large number of people

**Rush** (*Juncus species*) - Used along with other plants as flooring in churches in the past (sweet flag, meadowsweet, mugwort). There are famous rush-bearing ceremonies in the North of England. Rushes are also associated with Saint Brigid, particularly in Ireland where crosses of rushes were taken round houses on her feast day.

**Sainfoin** (Holy Hay) (*Onobrychis vicifolia*) - One tradition is that the hay in the manger where the baby Jesus lay sprouted pink flowers to become the sainfoin.

**Scarlet Pimpernel** (*Anagallis arvensis*) - In Devon there is a story that Irish Christians began to convert the locals including a girl called Urith who was captured but refused to recant her faith and was killed. The flower sprang from her blood and is called 'Urith's blood' in Devon.

**Shamrock** (several candidate *Trifolium*, *Medicago*, *Oxalis species*) - The tradition is that St Patrick used the three leaves of the shamrock to explain the concept of the Holy Trinity

**Snowdrops** (*Galanthus nivalis*) - Placed on altars of the Virgin Mary on Candlemas Day (February 2<sup>nd</sup>), another tradition states that an angel turned snowflakes to snowdrops to give Adam and Eve hope for spring as they left the Garden of Eden.

**Willow** (*Salix species*) - Often used in place of palms in Palm Sunday celebrations. Although Flora Celtica records that juniper was also used for Palm Sunday fronds in Barra.

*Image of a leaf from the Book of Hours, The Walters Art gallery, Baltimore.*

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