

## Bernard's Blog No 16



“The Holly bears a Blossom as white as lily flower.....”

despite its recent trimming, is showing clusters of holly flowers. The male and female flowers grow on separate trees in crowded, fragrant clusters at the base of the leaves, each small white blossom opening from a purple bud.

*Churchyard hedge*

As the Dog Rose blossoms fade and drop, the stems that arch and scramble in hedgerows take on a new beauty. The fruit festoon the hedges with scarlet, ovoid rose hips each about 2cm long. These may be made into jelly or syrup rich in vitamin C. They were collected in Britain towards the end of WWII to provide children with rose-hip syrup at a time when we needed all of the gifts from the hedgerow that we could get. It is said that in 1943 more than 500 tons of the hips were collected.



During World War II in Britain, the general public were encouraged to return to (or re-learn) the art of foraging in order to supplement or augment rationed foodstuffs. Most of the emphasis was on wild vegetation, there not being a great deal of wild game accessible to the ordinary person. The concept was not just tossed out to the population to follow-up as they saw fit, it was actively promoted and resourced by the government. The Ministry of Food published several leaflets on how to find and use the “Hedgerow Harvest” and County Herb Committees were set up to organize collections on a large scale. The latter was directed particularly towards wild foods with health benefits – many of the sources of fruit no longer being available – and also included foods for livestock feeding, such as horse-chestnuts (‘conkers.’)

One item singled out for particular attention was rose-hip, a valuable source of vitamin C. The national diet was at some risk of shortage of Vitamin C due to the cessation of importation of fruit such as oranges during the war. The solution was to ask the public to collect rose hips from wild or cultivated bushes, the harvest then to be processed by commercial companies into syrup which could then be made available in the shops.

I didn't need to travel far from home to disturb my next pleasant surprise. I have a lot of tidying-up to do in my garden since my spell away in the spring and early summer and the borders needed some radical weeding and reshaping. As I cleared a handful of dead twigs from under a shrub, I disturbed a delightful **Slow Worm**. This small shiny, coppery coloured legless lizard crawled over my hand and blinked. This presence of eyelids is a feature that distinguishes slow worms from snakes.





A slow mover but wriggly and this one has a stripe along its back which indicates it as a female. It was almost certainly longer at one time but like most lizards, slow worms can 'autotomise' or cast off their tail as a defence mechanism if caught by a predator. Their scientific name is *Anguis fragilis* -literally 'brittle 'eel'. The regrown tail is never as elegant and whip-like as the original but this is a matter of survival not aesthetics, and as I released her, I thanked her for eating the slugs in the evening.

Out of interest, slow worms give birth to active young.

We have reached another turning point of the year. The Autumn Equinox, just as the Vernal Equinox in March, the days and nights are of equal length, when the sun sits right above earth's equator. The autumn equinox for 2020 took place on Tuesday September 22<sup>nd</sup>. The equinox marks the end of summer, and the start of autumn – astronomically. Prepare for crunchy leaves and cosy weather and the start of the long nights of winter. Seasons are opposite on either side of the Equator, so the equinox in September is also known as the autumnal equinox in the Northern Hemisphere, and is considered the first day of autumn. In the Southern Hemisphere, it is known as the vernal (spring) equinox and marks the first day of spring.

The period to the shortest day now breaks into two neat six -week parts. From now until Hallowe'en we have the richness of autumn with its colour, fruits and fungi and the arrivals of winter birds in the churchyard and our gardens. From Hallowe'en until Christmas there are just a few weeks of cold to fill with the appreciation of stems, bark and frosts on crispy dog walks, until December 21<sup>st</sup>, the date of this year's winter solstice and popularly known as the shortest day of the year. But let's not wish the year away yet, there is more of autumns' subtle charms to discover if you take time to look amongst the shifting shades and colours.



There's a robin waiting for me every morning when I come out to top up the bird food. I suspect he has worked out when I come to let Bertie into the garden and sits patiently in the holly hedge. It is wonderful how robins' confidence with humans has evolved when you consider how territorial and aggressive they can be with other birds. It seems that they form a bond with a regular visitor, for another one joins me in the churchyard when I sit on the bench near the bird feeder. But I expect it is more that I am an easy food source at this hard time of the year. The church gravedigger tells me he has a regular robin who perches on his wheelbarrow whilst he is digging. For several seasons it was a one-eyed bird in Shirley, but now a new companion. The holly tree beside the Tamberlin Room is now heavily laden with green berries gradually changing to bright red.

*"The Holly bears a Berry, as red as any Blood....."*