

LOVING WEEDS

WHY WE NEED TO CHANGE OUR ATTITUDES TO MANY PLANTS WE CALL WEEDS





Dr C J Betts

Complaints about weeds are amongst the most frequent grouses we receive about the sites we manage. In this article, I want to try to change the way people think about these plants¹, but first there is an important exception – the so-called Invasive Alien Species (IAS), sometimes called “non-natives”. These are the exotic colonisers such as Japanese knotweed, Indian (Himalayan) balsam, and others which can cause serious ecological harm. You can find a list of these and information about them at <https://bit.ly/invasivesUK> but be aware that there are other “garden escapes” such as rhododendron that also cause problems for native flora and a few native species that are very aggressive and do sometimes have to be controlled in sensitive habitat - bracken being one example.




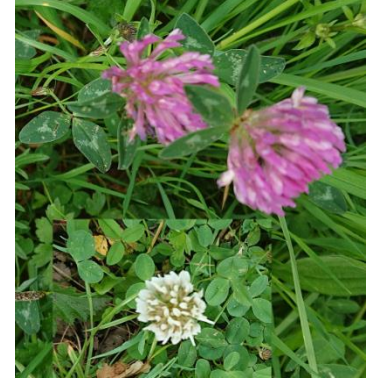
What I am writing about here are the common wild native plants that people tend to despise as “weeds” but which have great benefits for biodiversity and support a wide range of pollinators and herbivorous macro-invertebrates generally which are food for other animals, especially birds. The foliage and seeds of these wild plants also feed many mammals and birds directly.





In the table below, I have listed just a few of the very common wild plants that people think of as weeds but which we should not treat as enemies, and in many cases should encourage as important members of biologically diverse communities in our battle to halt species loss and support nature.





¹ See also my note at www.bettsecology.co.uk/insight/thrilling-weeds.





	Common name	Scientific name	Comment
	Bindweed/Bryony	<i>Convolvulus, Bryonia, Tamus</i> (photo is black bryony <i>Tamus communis</i>).	Twining climbers, common in hedges and elsewhere. Bryonies are poisonous ² . Bindweeds are good for nectar and pollen but may choke other plants.
	Bittercress	<i>Cardamine</i>	Very common in waste places and gardens. Photo is hairy bittercress <i>C. hirsuta</i> which likes drier habitats than wavy bittercress. Small flowers but long season (spring to autumn).
	Bittersweet (aka woody nightshade)	<i>Solanum dulcamara</i>	Common scrambling plant in hedges, woods, scrub and neglected places. Contains alkaloid poisons but some birds can and do eat the berries. Flowers are attractive to pollinators.
	Buttercups	<i>Ranunculus</i>	Meadow and creeping buttercups are very common and spread rapidly. Good nectar and pollen source.





² More about poisonous plants at www.bettsecology.co.uk/insight/plants-can-bite.





	Common name	Scientific name	Comment
	<p>Dandelions, cat's-ear, hawkbits, hawk's-beards, hawkweeds and similar.</p>	<p><i>Hypochaeris</i>, <i>Leontodon</i>, <i>Crepis</i>, <i>Hieracium</i>, etc.</p>	<p>Part of the large family of composites (now Asteraceae). Many are valuable for wildlife. See also thistles, sow-thistles, daisies, colt's-foot, mugwort, groundsel, ragwort, yarrow below).</p>
	<p>Chickweeds, mouse-ears and stitchworts</p>	<p><i>Stellaria</i>, <i>Cerastium</i>, <i>Stellaria</i>, (greater stitchwort photographed is <i>R. holostea</i>).</p>	<p>Several are very common and have long flowering periods and are good food sources for macro-invertebrates.</p>
	<p>Cleavers</p>	<p><i>Galium aparine</i></p>	<p>Also known as goosegrass and several other names. A well-known sticky native plant that is very common. The sawfly <i>Halidamia affinis</i> feeds on it.</p>
	<p>Clovers and trefoils</p>	<p><i>Trifolium</i>, <i>Medicago</i>, <i>Lotus</i>, etc.</p>	<p>These plants are loved by bees and other pollinators for their nectar. Bird's-foot-trefoil is a foodplant of the common blue butterfly.</p>





	Common name	Scientific name	Comment
	Colt's-foot	<i>Tussilago farfara</i>	Often on waste ground. Early flowers attractive to bees and butterflies.
	Cow parsley and similar umbellifers.	<i>Anthriscus sylvestris</i>	Several similar plants. Like many of this family (now called the Apiaceae), flowers are attractive to a range of flying macro-invertebrates.
	Daisies	<i>Bellis perennis</i>	Loves to colonise lawns and shorter grass where they thrive as long as mower blades are not set too low. Attractive to both insects and people. Flowers all year.
	Dead-nettles	<i>Lamium</i> (photo is white dead-nettle <i>L. album</i>)	Common along hedgerows and verges. Long-tongued insects visit the tubular flowers.





	Common name	Scientific name	Comment
	Docks (& sorrels)	<i>Rumex</i>	Over a dozen species with broad-leaved and curled being particularly common. Over 100 species of macro-invertebrates are associated with docks.
	Forget-me-nots	<i>Myosotis</i> (photo is <i>M. sylvatica</i>)	Several species of which some spread rapidly. Attractive flowers and important for bees & other pollinators. Members of the borage family which contains other species often considered as “weeds”.
	Ground-elder	<i>Aegopodium podagraria</i>	Widespread but very unpopular with gardeners because of its persistence and creeping rhizomes, but it is another umbellifer with flowers that attract insects, etc. Needs to be kept in its place!
	Ground-ivy	<i>Glechoma hederacea</i>	Very common in woods, hedges, scrub and grassland. Provides pollen for bees, used by some gall-producing insects.





	Common name	Scientific name	Comment
	Groundsel	<i>Senecio vulgaris</i>	<p>Virtually ubiquitous in disturbed ground, a hardy annual that flowers throughout the year. Copious seed is eaten by finches and it is a foodplant for several moths, beetles and flies.</p>
	Herb-Robert	<i>Geranium robertianum</i>	<p>Common in woodland, hedges, on drives, disturbed ground and elsewhere. Pretty flowers with long season. Good nectar source for bees, hoverflies, etc.</p>
	Hogweed	<i>Heracleum sphondylium</i>	<p>Very common umbellifer of roadsides, hedges, embankments, etc. Very attractive to flying macro-invertebrates due to copious nectar production, and always worth looking at what is settling on the flowers.</p>
	Lesser celandine	<i>Ficaria verna</i>	<p>Common and widespread pretty early spring flower. Important nectar source for early flying insects.</p>

	Common name	Scientific name	Comment
	Mugwort	<i>Artemisia vulgaris</i>	Very common on waste grounds, along verges, in scrub, etc.
	Plantains	<i>Plantago</i>	Ribwort (this photo) and greater plantains are often disliked as “weeds” but their foliage and seeds are nutritious for wildlife. Ribwort plantain is an important phytosociological component of species-rich meadows.
	Ragwort	<i>Jacobaea, Senecio</i>	Common ragwort (this picture) has a particularly bad press. It is poisonous and can cause problems to stock when in hay but about eighty macro-invertebrates are associated with it, most famously the cinnabar moth, larvae of which can be seen in my photo. Ragworts are important plants in our native flora.
	Self-heal	<i>Prunella vulgaris</i>	Common in grass verges, in shorter grass, on paths and in woodland clearings. Attractive to bees, butterflies, hoverflies, etc.

	Common name	Scientific name	Comment
	Shepherd's-purse	<i>Capsella bursa-pastoris</i>	Very common in arable and disturbed land and waysides. Produces abundant seed and is in flower all year. Cabbage family.
	Sow-thistles	<i>Sonchus</i>	Prickly (this picture), smooth and perennial sow-thistles are very common on cultivated and waste ground, open woods, etc. Bees, flies, butterflies, moths, beetles and other macro-invertebrates are attracted to their flowers.
	Speedwells	<i>Veronica</i>	This photo is of <i>V. chamaedrys</i> the germander speedwell which is very common in grassland, woods, etc. There are several other species such as <i>V. persica</i> common field-speedwell which may occur in lawns.
	Spurges	<i>Euphorbia</i>	A large family with a dozen or so British species, a couple of which are very common - sun spurge and petty spurge (this photo). Milky sap is toxic and can cause skin abrasions in presence of sunlight. Flowers are unusual and distinctive. Nectar to attract pollinators is produced in specialised glands separate from the flowers in the flower-head (cyathium).

	Common name	Scientific name	Comment
	St. John's-worts	<i>Hypericum</i>	Another large family, perforate St John's-wort <i>H. perforatum</i> is very common along verges, in scrub and grassland. Flowers attract moths and bees.
	Stinging nettle	<i>Urtica dioica</i>	Familiar to all of us, usually painfully, stinging nettles are famously known as the foodplant of butterflies, especially small tortoiseshell, peacock and red admiral but there are a hundred or more species of macro-invertebrates that are associated with nettles. Please leave them alone.
	Thistles	<i>Cirsium</i>	These are the plume thistles of which spear, creeping and marsh thistles are very common. My photo is of the marsh thistle <i>C. palustre</i> which is abundant in wet/damp ground. Thistles attract copious macro-invertebrates and are of very high wildlife value, though creeping thistle can be rather invasive.
	Vetches and tares	<i>Vicia</i>	Members of the large pea family. Bush vetch <i>V. sepium</i> (my photo) is very common along woodland paths, in scrub and taller grassland. Its flowers are attractive to bees and other insects and its leaves are eaten by weevils and other beetles as well as the larvae of various other invertebrates.

	Common name	Scientific name	Comment
	Willowherbs	<i>Epilobium</i> , <i>Chamerion</i>	Excellent nectar source and foodplants for moths and butterflies. <i>C. angustifolium</i> (this photo) is the foodplant for the elephant hawk-moth.
	Wood avens (aka herb bennet)	<i>Geum urbanum</i>	Very common in woods, scrub & on hedge-banks. Hooked seeds hitch a ride on passing animals. Yellow flowers provide nectar for insects.
	Yarrow	<i>Achillea millefolium</i>	Very common in grasslands, verges, hedge-banks and lawns. A valuable wildlife plant producing copious nectar. Some birds may use its foliage in nests perhaps as an anti-parasitic. Foodplant of the tawny speckled pug moth <i>Eupithecia icterata</i> .
	Brambles (blackberries)	<i>Rubus fruticosus</i> agg.	Although it can be the bane of gardeners, this prickly scrambling shrub is of very high wildlife value for its flowers, fruit, foliage and hook-spined stems which are a safe place for nests and hiding for birds and mammals.

	Common name	Scientific name	Comment
	Briars/dog-rose	<i>Rosa</i>	Several species and many micro-species. Photo is of <i>Rosa canina</i> hips. important nectar source for macro-invertebrates and hips provide food in autumn for many birds such as redwing, blackbird, waxwing and small mammals such as bank vole.
	Grasses	Poaceae	Common couch, annual meadow-grass, cock's-foot, Yorkshire fog, tufted hair-grass, fescues, rye-grass and several others (and a few sedges) are often regarded as unwanted weeds but such species play an important role ecologically and phytosociologically.
	Ferns	POLYPODIOPSIDA	Ferns are generally benign and attractive in a range of habitats but bracken <i>Pteridium aquilinum</i> (this photo), though providing cover in summer, can be very invasive and need control
	Horsetails	<i>Equisetum</i>	This photo is of the great horsetail <i>E. telmateia</i> but smaller species are more familiar. Field horsetail <i>E. arvense</i> can be a nuisance in cultivated ground. Most are benign and attractive in the wild, though.

I have not included aquatics in the table as that is rather a specialist area with many introduced species causing problems. We should also remember the algae, lichens, mosses and liverworts which are virtually ubiquitous and some people spend much time and money trying to eliminate. It is better to leave them alone. They, too, are important members of the ecosystem and provide food, shelter and habitat for a host of tiny creatures as well as nesting material and often attractive cover for ugly masonry or ecological richness in lawns, paths and other substrata. Just examine a clump of moss under the microscope and you will find many tiny animals that have made their home in it.

We manage sites for biodiversity, so we promote diverse populations of native plants on our sites and these include a wide range of “weeds” so, please, before you complain about them, consider their ecological value and why we encourage them.

© Betts Ecology 2022 www.bettsecology.com

Illustrations are the author’s photographs or owned by Betts Ecology or (the three drawings) public domain.

