

Bramble *Rubus fruticosus*

What's in a name?

The name *Rubus fruticosus* means blackberry in Latin. The common name is derived from the old English 'brambel', or 'brymbyl', which means prickly. In some agricultural communities, the berries are called 'moochers'. Mooching means 'playing truant' and it perhaps due to the fact that children used to skip school to harvest them during picking season and earn good pocket money from commercial jam makers.

Botany & Ecology

This plant starts to flower in early April and continues to produce blossom until late September. There are over 400 different species but all have five petals on the flowers. It is one of few native plants that reproduces through a process known as apomixes (see glossary), which is why there are so many different forms.



A variety of wildlife use the bramble as a source of food (nectar, pollen, flowers, fruit, leaves) and as a place to live. About 240 species of insects and mites feed on the leaves of bramble, 32 of which rely exclusively on the plant. Twelve of these have red data book status (see glossary). Bramble is a very valuable habitat for dormice which nest within it, they also eat the flowers and the insects attracted to them and consume the autumn berries.

Birds like the song thrush, nightingale and wren utilise bramble as a key nesting site whilst providing cover and protection from predators. The young shoots and leaves provide food for large herbivores such as deer.

Folk Medicine

If left to grow unchecked, the shoots can form natural arches which root at the tip. In the Middle Ages people suffering from boils, hernias or rheumatism were passed through the arch in a cleansing ceremony or to bring about a 'new beginning'.

The fruit has long been used for treating sore throats. Modern herbalists still recommend the use of frozen berries to sooth a night-time cough. In Scotland, the root was boiled and inhaled as a cure for asthma and bronchitis. Elsewhere in the UK, the root was also used to treat kidney stones. The practice of chewing the tip of young leaves was prescribed to those suffering from diarrhoea and toothache.

Folklore

There is a belief which goes back centuries that says not to pick those berries which show signs of mildew, common with the last fruits of the season, for these were urinated or spat on by the Devil on Michaelmas Night (29th September).

Bramble was once planted on graves to cover the unattractive weeds and deter grazing or damage by livestock. The more superstitious communities also planted it on graves in the hope of keeping the dead in and the Devil out.

*Please note, readers should take advice from a qualified doctor or herbalist before using plants as a cure for ailments.

