

## Symbolism in nature

### Aim of the activity

- To explore various plants or parts of plants, that have symbolism or folklore attached to them, and find connections between individuals and plants through those stories. This will help establish a connection, or re-connection with specific plants and encourage the sharing of personal memories.
- Collecting the materials can be an additional activity in advance BUT bear in mind the plants that are chosen should have interesting facts that you know about or have time to look up beforehand!

### How to

- Before the session select a plant(s) or season from the activity sheets that you'd like to explore and collect samples
- At the session, scatter the material onto a table and gather everyone around
- Select a plant, or part of plant and use the relevant fact sheet to discover more about the plant. You can use photos, books etc., to help enhance the conversation
- Have everyone handle the plant(s) whilst you're talking. A tactile connection helps to stimulate memories and there's an opportunity to use other senses for an enhanced experience
- Encourage people to share their own experiences or knowledge. This activity is about bringing people's focus from a general awareness of nature to specific details from which comes shared conversation and the opportunity to exercise the brain using voluntary attention



# Extending the activity

## Suggested additional activities

- Bring along some lengths of garden twine/string/coloured raffia and some luggage tags
- At the end of the conversation, ask people select up to 3 plants that they feel connected to
- They then tie these plants to the rope/twine/raffia and write their story of the plants on the luggage tags before attaching them to the rope
- It becomes a temporary hanging ornament which can be used to create future conversations
- Or take a walk or trip to a local garden/park and take photos of some of the plants that have been discussed

Feel free to create your own information sheets for new plants. People may talk about their favourite flowers/trees etc., which will give you some direction.

### **NOTE:**

Some of the plants in the following examples are toxic if swallowed. We advise that any samples used in this activity, whether from the examples given or your own selection, are only handled for the purposes of exploring and discussing them.

They should NOT be consumed unless you have knowledge of the plants properties and know them to be harmless if ingested.



## Pine Cones

### Symbolism & Folklore

- The Pineal gland is named because of its likeness in shape to a pine cone. Spiritualists refer to it as the 'third eye' and believe it represents spiritual enlightenment.
- There is a pine cone on the Pope's staff and also large statue in a square in the Vatican City; Roman Catholics also believe it represents spiritual enlightenment
- It is also symbolic of illumination in Catholicism and is often seen on top of candle holders or lanterns

### Other names

- Strobile or Strobilus
- Pine nut

### Did you know?

- Fibonacci discovered a sequence of numbers that when drawn on a graph depict a spiral. This spiral shape can be found many times in nature as can the numbers.
- Cones have spirals both clockwise and anticlockwise – when counted they turn out to be adjacent Fibonacci numbers
- Pine trees were used by Welsh drovers as way-markers to mark their routes to market. This is because pine trees are very tall and can be seen from distance, they are evergreen and can grow in poor soil so were more prolific decades ago
- Celts and ancient Romans believed the pine cone represented love and fertility and would put one under their pillow
- Pine trees and other trees producing cones were a staple diet for herbivorous dinosaurs such as the Allosaurus
- Pine nuts are a good source of Vitamins K, B1 & L as well as magnesium and protein



## Symbolism & Folklore

- A symbol of intellectual achievement in ancient Rome; wreaths were made as crowns for winners of poetry contests
- Wreaths were also given to winning athletes in ancient Greece
- Regarded as the emblem of fidelity, priests would also present a wreath of ivy to newly married couples
- It is a Pagan symbol for eternal life and an ancient symbol of wine and fertility, representing the god Bacchus in Roman mythology

## Other Names

- Bindwood
- Lovestone

## Did you know?

- Research by English Heritage indicates that under certain circumstances ivy can preserve old buildings by helping to regulate temperature on the stonework
- During the German occupation of the Channel Islands ivy berries were boiled and eaten
- It was used as a wash for swelling, sores, dandruff and other skin problems. In folk medicine the leaves were boiled and used to treat corns
- Ivy berries are a food supply for various insects and birds in the autumn/winter, including bees, red admiral butterflies and blackbirds. Because the berries have a high fat content.
- Ivy can also be browsed by cattle



# Snowdrop

## Symbolism & Folklore

- Its name represents purity, hope & rebirth
- As a symbol of purity, it was used as an emblem for Snowdrop Bands in the late 19th, early 20th Century. These bands were set up to promote purity and chastity amongst working class women (aged 11 and above). Their membership cards were the picture of a snowdrop and the flowers were present at all meetings.
- According to one Christian story, an angel turned snowflakes into flowers by breathing on them and then gave them to Adam and Eve as sign of hope, as they were evicted from the Garden of Eden.
- Amongst pagans, the snowdrop is associated with Imbolc; a festival marking the beginning of spring. The arrival of the snowdrop signifies winter is turning into spring
- March 1st – Snowdrop day in Russia; children pick bunches to give as gifts to parents/grandparents as a symbol of thanksgiving over the passing of winter
- The Victorians were superstitious about snowdrops; believing that bringing even a single one into the house meant death in the family

## Other names

- Candlemas bells, Dingle dangle, White Ladies

## Did you know?

- Its name means ‘milk white flower’ (Galanthus) ‘resembling snow’(nivalis)
- It was brought over from mainland Europe (Italy possibly) by monks and planted around monasteries
- It was common for them to be planted in cemeteries by soldiers returning from the Crimean War to remember their fallen comrades
- In 2010, a substance called Galantamine, found in Snowdrops, was authorised by NICE (National Institute for Clinical Excellence) to be used to help treat mild to moderate Alzheimer’s
- In 2011, one single bulb sold on ebay for £357. It was a special variety known as Galanthus plicatus EA Bowles
- It is illegal to collect their bulbs from the wild



## Oak trees

### Symbolism & Folklore

- Strength, good luck, stability, protection
- Druids consider it one of the most sacred trees; oak groves were popular places for their religious ceremonies
- In Cornwall, a nail driven into an oak cured toothache, while in Wales, rubbing the oak with the palm of your left hand on Midsummer's Day kept you healthy all year
- Lightning is supposed to strike the oak more than any other tree. Some say this is because they are often taller than other trees nearby and have a higher moisture content; i.e. their tree sap is a good conductor for lightning
- Thicker acorn shells mean it's going to be an extra-cold winter

### Did you know?

- Roman commanders were presented with crowns of oak leaves during their victory parades, and oak leaves have continued as decorative icons of military prowess to the present day
- The bark was valued by the leather tanning industry for its high tannin content. Large amounts were sent from woodlands in the north west of Scotland to Glasgow during the Industrial Revolution.
- The bark would yield a brown dye and oak galls gave the strong black dye from which ink was made.
- Oak gall ink was used to write the Magna Carta.....and Newton's theories and Mozart's music!



# Lily of the Valley

## Symbolism & Folklore

- It symbolises humility; purity and the return of happiness
- John Gerard (C16 botanist & herbalist) believed that an ointment made from its flowers helped relieve gout
- The plant will bloom on the grave of someone executed for a crime they didn't commit
- Planted in a garden they will protect a home from evil spirits
- The plant grew from a battle between St. Leonard and a dragon called Temptation (French folklore)
- In German mythology, it is linked to the goddess of spring, Ostara and represents life

## Other names

- Ladder to Heaven
- Jacob's Ladder
- Mary's Tears (A Christian story tells of how the flower sprang from the Virgin Mary's tears at the crucifixion of Jesus)

## Did you know?

- Worn on people's outfits at the Floral day celebrations in Helston, Cornwall, as the town's symbolic flower. Men wear it upright on the left whilst women wear it upside down on the right
- Used in the past to relieve symptoms of depression, epilepsy and stroke
- All parts of this plant are poisonous if ingested
- It's not actually part of the lily family but is instead scientifically categorised in the asparagus family (but NOT edible like asparagus!)
- Their leaves can be harvested for making dye (green in spring, yellow in autumn)



# Daffodil

## Symbolism & Folklore

- This flower symbolizes re-birth; probably because it often grows around Easter or in March, around the time of the Spring Equinox
- It may also symbolize unrequited love or vanity (the story of Narcissus)
- Old English folklore also discourages from bringing daffodils into the house when poultry are sitting on eggs. They believed they would stop their poultry laying eggs or the eggs hatching. A variant of this lore is the number of goslings that will be hatched and reared is the same as the number of daffodil flower stems that are brought into the house in the first bouquet of the year.
- Ancient Greeks believed Daffodils grew in the underworld
- In the State of Maine, USA, superstition states if you point at a daffodil with your index finger it won't bloom
- The Chinese believe it to be a flower of good luck, but must be forced to bloom if used in Feng Shui (Chinese philosophical system for creating harmony in your environment)

## Other names

- Daffadowndilly
- Jonquil (Latin name for reed – probably used because of the reed-like leaves of the Daffodil)
- Lent lily

## Did you know?

- The Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust manages 60% of the land and pays 1 daffodil a year as rent to the Duchy of Cornwall
- All parts of the plant can cause vomiting if ingested
- Oil obtained from certain varieties is used in the process of making perfumes in France
- Like the Snowdrop, daffodils contain galantamine; drug companies have planted acres of daffodils in Wales for research. 10 tons of bulbs will produce 1 kilogram of galantamine



# Summer plants

## Honeysuckle

### Symbolism & folklore

- This plant symbolizes love, tenderness or love never forgotten
- Grow honeysuckle near your home to attract love, luck & wealth and to keep negative influences out of your garden
- Rub a flower on your forehead to increase psychic abilities
- The plant's clinging tendrils are said to symbolize a lover's embrace whilst its scent induces passionate dreams
- If brought into the house, a wedding will take place within a year
- Honeysuckle would sometimes be grown on trees or walls in Victorian times; as a symbol of marriage and fidelity, the honeysuckle was seen to represent the wife clinging to her husband (the wall/tree) for support

### Name

- Common Honeysuckle was known as Woodbine (Wodebyne) during the times of Chaucer & Shakespeare

### Did you know?

- The sturdy stems of honeysuckle have been used to make rope as far back as the Bronze Age



## Evening Primrose

### Symbolism & Folklore

- Victorians said the flower represented fickleness
- Counters the effect of drinking too much wine; however Ancient Greeks believed eating the roots increased appetite for wine!

### Name

- Kings Cure All
- Night Candle
- Fever Plant
- Night Willow

### Did you know?

- Promoted as a herbal remedy for a very broad range of conditions, including dermatitis, premenstrual syndrome, menopausal symptoms, eczema, inflammation, hyperactivity in children, high cholesterol, asthmatic cough, upset stomach, psoriasis, rheumatoid arthritis, Irritable Bowel Syndrome and diabetic nerve damage.....to name a few!
- Native Americans used the plant for food and medicine; boiling and eating the roots (nutty flavour) and using leaf poultices for bruises and haemorrhoids



## Guelder Rose

### Symbolism & Folklore

- This is the national symbol of the Ukraine where it is known as Kalyna; in Ukrainian folklore it symbolises fire
- Folk songs relating to Cossacks used the shrub as a symbol of loyalty through blood, of blood spilled in battle and of Cossack life in general
- In the Ukraine, the plant stands for companionship, loyalty, true love

### Name

- Kalyna (Ukrainian name)
- Cramp bark
- Kings Crown
- Rose Elder

### Did you know?

- The bark is used in herbalism; said to aid muscular spasms and ovarian cramps
- Native Americans used it for mumps
- Berries turn black when dying and have been used to make ink



# Autumn plants

## Berries

### Symbolism & Folklore

- Red berries often symbolise 'life' or 'blood'
- Mistletoe berries (white) are used as a symbol for so many things: peace, friendship, goodwill, love, beauty, fertility; even thunder
- Some folklore give blackberries a bad name. For example, in mid Mediterranean countries they are associated with spiritual neglect, arrogance or sorrow. Others say the fruit was cursed by the devil
- In English folklore passing under a bramble branch means it will cure (or prevent) all manner of afflictions including hernia, ruptures, pimples and boils
- Some say blackberries shouldn't be picked after Michaelmas Day (September 29th) whilst others say Old Michaelmas Day (October 11th), as folklore says that the Devil has fouled them

### Other names

- Scaldhead (blackberry)
- Prickwood (spindle berry – so called as the wood was used to make spindles for lace-making and spinning wool)

### Did you know?

- Fresh blackberry leaves, if bruised, can be used to provide relief to burns
- A syrup made from blackberries will help ease winter colds
- Ancient Greeks used blackberries as a remedy for gout
- In Chinese medicine Hawthorn berries are used to help with bladder problems and kidney stones
- Sloe berries can be used as a tonic (albeit very bitter!) for various ailments including eczema, indigestion, colds and kidney stones. In the 17th & 18th centuries they were brewed as a cleanser for upset stomachs



# Chrysanthemum

## Symbolism & Folklore

- According to Chinese legend 12 young men and women left china with baskets of Chrysanthemums to find the 'herb of youth'. Their ship wrecked and they swam to a deserted island where they planted the chrysanthemums and this is how the plant came to Japan
- Symbolises optimism and happiness in Asia, but in mainland Europe it symbolises bereavement. In England, different colours have different connotations; e.g. red Chrysanthemum symbolises love whilst yellow symbolises slighted love

## Other Names

- Mums

## Did you know?

- Japan hosts an annual Festival of Happiness to celebrate the flower
- The Imperial Seal of Japan is the image of a Chrysanthemum
- A sacred flower in China and Japan. The petals and greens of the plant are rich in antioxidants and are used in cooking and healing



### Symbolism & Folklore

- Hazelnuts symbolise wisdom and inspiration. Celtic mythology tells of nine hazel trees that shed their nuts into a sacred pool. The salmon in the pool ate the nuts and became wise. The number of spots on a salmon is said to tell how many hazel nuts it ate
- Twigs of Hazel placed in a window frame protect the house from lightning
- 3 pins of hazel wood driven into the frame of the house will protect it from fire
- In Norse mythology, it is known as the Tree of Knowledge
- Legend says that Joseph of Arimathea built the original Glastonbury abbey from hazel branches

### Did you know?

- In the past hazel nuts were ground up and mixed with flour to make bread
- Cobnuts and filberts are all nuts grown from specific varieties of hazel; there's always an argument as to whether they are the same as hazel nuts or different!
- The name Filbert is supposedly taken from St. Philbert's Day – August 20th – a day on which the nuts are supposed to start ripening
- Holy Cross Day – 14th September – was traditionally a day off from school for children to go 'nutting'. This lasted up to the First World War
- The English name for the tree has developed from the Anglo-Saxon name haesel knut. Haesel means cap or hat and if you look at the leaves around the nuts, they look a bit like a cap; hence the name.
- The hazel nut is the inspiration behind the saying "in a nutshell" because it's so hard to get into the shell and the nut inside

