

SOAP, PERFUMERY AND COSMETICS

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Valentines Day and other sentimentality

I do not know what it is about this time of year, but as 14th February draws near and Spring is in the air (*poetry!*), my thoughts turn to things nostalgically romantic as I look through some of the old traditions of days gone by.

In the eastern counties the plant Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) used to be called Yarroway, and it was used to tickle the inside of the nose while the following lines were spoken. “Yarroway, Yarroway, bear a white blow, if my love love me, my nose will bleed now” (*not the best of poetry!*). No doubt a sprig of holly would have brought even greater chances of success in finding this indicator of romance, and yarrow would have been a useful decoction to help the nasal scarring to heal up and the swelling to subside.

If they were not stuffing it up their noses then young girls were sewing an ounce of Yarrow into a flannel and placed under their pillows before going to bed, having repeated the words: Thou pretty herb of Venus' tree, Thy true name it is Yarrow; Now who my bosom friend must be, Pray tell thou me to-morrow (*it seems poetry was not a particularly strong suit at this time*). A vision of the future husband should then have come in their dreams.

In other parts of the country, young girls sowed the seeds of Butterbur or *Petasites vulgaris* in order to divine their future love. According to the ritual, seeds of this plant had to be sowed by a young unmarried woman half an hour before sunrise on a Friday morning in a lonesome place. She strewed the seeds, saying: I sow, I sow! then, my own dear, come here, come here, and mow and mow (*at least this rhymes*)! The seed being scattered, she would see her future husband mowing with a scythe at a short distance from her. Butterbur has been used externally on wounds and swellings – useful if the scythe should have slipped.

In Norfolk you could see a manic young wench walking with eyes closed shut in meadows of daisies. Suddenly she would stop, stoop and grab a handful of what was growing beneath her feet. The number of daisies in her hand indicated the number of years until she would be married.

This obsession for finding a partner knew no bounds and the unlucky chaps of this time must have lived in torment, trying to keep an eye open for all sorts of tricks and spells perpetrated by these frustrated lasses. One such lure was to obtain a peascod (pea pod) that contained nine peas, and then to write on a piece of paper “Come in, my dear, and do not fear” and enclose it inside the peascod and lay it under the door. The first person who came into the room would be her

husband.

Poor unsuspecting young men were being seduced by girls having Valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*) stuffed in their underwear. Apparently this herb ensured these young ladies would never lack lovers (*this is quite surprising as valerian smells like rotting socks*).

If all this were not enough, witches prepared love philtres to ensnare unsuspecting men made with fresh tubers of orchid (*Orchis* spp), or flowers of Solomon's seal (*Polygonum multiflorum*), or roots of periwinkle sometimes called sorcerer's violet (*Vinca* spp) or seeds of endive (*Chicorium endivia*). Other bizarre ingredients included kidneywort (*Umbilicus rupestris*) which is for urinary stones, mandrake (*Mandragora officinarum*) which is toxic, causes colonic irritation, vomiting and purging and deadly nightshade (*Atropa bella-donna*) which is a real heart stopper and absolutely deadly. These girls certainly played for keeps!

Cyclamen (*Cyclamen hederifolium*) also known as Sowbread was baked and made into little flat cakes and had the reputation of being 'a good amorous medicine,' causing the partaker to fall violently in love. This is somewhat surprising, because even Pliny the Elder knew it was an arrow poison - simple external application can cause vomiting and premature bladder release. Now that is hardly romantic even by today's standards. It has been used on indolent ulcers and as a complexion wash (not recommended).

Native Americans considered purple meadow rue (*Thalictrum dasycarpum*) a love potion that could reconcile quarrelling lovers. The seeds were sometimes placed in a couple's food by relatives to try to restore peace in their home. I suppose this was a kinder solution than eviction, though the leaves and the roots have been quoted as being laxative, so perhaps fighting to be first in the toilet was probably a quieter occupation. Externally it is cited for eczema and purulent wounds.

In all of the thousands of references there were very few where a young man could seduce his girl, except for the bachelor of the Ponca tribe who would rub a piece of Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*) root on the palm of his hand, then scheme to shake hands with the girl he desired to marry. She became putty in his hands and would marry him within a week. Externally Red Puccoon is useful for nail ulcerations and fungoid infections.

My own recommendation comes from an old West Country belief, that if you pick a bunch of marigolds at dawn you risk turning into an alcoholic. Calendula is also a wonderful vulnerary and so would be useful in repairing the wounds received from fighting off all those women.