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Wildflowers ~ Brenan Simpson

A few weeks ago, a real estate advertisement in this paper made particular mention of a tree, a Rocky Mountain Juniper (*Juniperus scopulorum*), which grows on the property that was being advertised. That tree deserved to be included as a feature of the landscape, because it is rather unusual. Normally this variety of juniper grows east of the Coast Mountains, especially in the Okanagan and Cariboo areas and from there up into the Rockies, but it also appears here on the Gulf Islands, where it usually takes the form of a low shrub. It can often be found along the edges of dry cliffs, near Garry Oak and Arbutus trees. However, the tree in the advertisement is a beautiful old towering specimen that leaves no doubt that the juniper can equally well be a magnificent full-sized tree. In fact, another of the common names of this variety is the Rocky Mountain Red Cedar and a very close relative, the Virginia Juniper, is the tree which is commonly known as the Red Cedar throughout most of the United States, except of course, in the Pacific Northwest, where the people, like us, know what a red cedar really is.

Most 'Cedar Chests' are actually juniper chests and that should give you some idea of the scent of the wood of a juniper, which results from the highly aromatic oils that are found throughout the entire plant, including in the little hard blue berries, which the female plant bears and which take two years to ripen.

In the Old French language, the latin word for a juniper, *juniperus*, eventually evolved into geneve. The city of Geneva gets its name from an abundance of junipers growing in that area. The Dutch took the word geneve and turned it into jenever. They then got the very smart idea of using the aromatic berries to add flavour to clear alcohol and called the resulting drink by the same name as the plant. In 1689, a Dutchman, William of Orange, became King of England and brought some of his Dutch habits along with him, including jenever drinking. It did not take long for this to catch on in England too, where the name was again altered and shortened

into Gin. The recipe was also altered slightly and the English variety became known as 'London Gin', while the original Dutch type became 'Hollands Gin' or 'Geneva'.

At first, by keeping the price very low at about a penny a glass, gin drinking was encouraged in England, for the sale of the grain needed to distill the alcohol made excellent profits for the landed gentry. But the terrible alcoholism which resulted from this led to dreadful social consequences, particularly amongst the poor and eventually it also led to a greatly increased death rate. This created a severe shortage of labour and an inevitable demand for higher wages by those still around to work. Since the number of employers being forced to pay more to their workers was much larger than the number of landed gentry profiting from selling grain, Parliament at last decided to do something about it and, in 1751, cured the problem by placing a high tax on liquor sales. Two hundred and forty years later and half way around the world, we're still paying it.

Now all this talk of booze isn't designed to make readers rush off and suck a cedar chest to compare the taste to a dry martini. Gin has its place in the world of botany too.

Paperwhite Narcissi, which many of us grow in pots to flower around Christmas time, tend to get tall and leggy and eventually flop over unless they are staked and tied. But if their pots are watered regularly with a mixture of one tablespoon of gin to one cup of lukewarm water, the plants will stay sturdy, the leaves and stems remain stiff and upright and there will be no need for untidy looking stakes and string. Vodka doesn't work, nor does any other liquor—it has to be gin, but even though the paperwhite bulbs probably come from Holland, London Gin works fine and, as an added advantage, despite the taxes, it's cheaper.

*Brenan's wildflower articles are also published as a book *Flowers at My Feet: West Wildflowers in Legend, Literature and Lore*.*

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