

Reprint Island Tides

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Wildflowers ~ Brenan Simpson

It must have been a source of great annoyance to those stern disciplinarians, the Captains of the Royal Navy in the mid 18th to mid 19th centuries to see the neat and clean decks of their ships cluttered up with the mess of nursery gardeners. But orders were orders and their superiors had decreed that many of them should carry naturalists on board, for Princess Augusta, the mother of George III, had created a botanic garden at there palace at Kew, outside London and needed new and exotic plants for it. So too did John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, the country's great hero, for his new estate at Blenheim, being built for him as a gift from the grateful taxpayers and landscaped by the famous landscape architect, 'Capability' Brown. And, with no disrespect to those who gave the Captains their orders, their Lordships of the Admiralty, those were also the days when a nice profit could often be made fro the sale of new plants which the naturalists brought back with them. So the Captains had to grin and bear it and ships' desks sprouted trees and shrubs from earth-filled boxes, cold frames stuffed with flowers covered the quarter decks and dirty little men with watering cans ran around and got in all the proper sailors' way. For these ships were at sea for up to three years at a time and the collected plants could not just be packed away in a hold, but had to be grown in full daylight, in soil in containers until they arrived home to England. And very sophisticated some of these containers became, because often tropical plants had to be brought around the tip of South America, close to the Antarctic ice pack, and they could not be allowed to freeze.

All of the famous British maritime explorers of that era carried naturalists along with them. Captain James Cook, circumnavigating the world on the *Endeavour* had Joseph Banks, who went on to become the Director of the Gardens at Kew. Vice-admiral Robert Fitzroy of the *Beagle* carried Charles Darwin and we all know what he did later. Sir John Franklin, and two of his expeditions into the Canadian Arctic, was accompanied by John Richardson, who was knighted

eventually for his work not only as a naturalist but also as a map maker. And in our own part of the world, Captain George Vancouver got Archibald Menzies for company on the Discovery.

Like Darwin and Richardson, Menzies studied medicine at Edinburgh University but unlike them, he had to work his way through school by labouring as an assistant gardener at the Edinburgh Botanic Gardens. Medicine and botany were, of course, still closely allied in those days. All four of these naturalists had plants named after them. The *Banksia* is a family of Australian evergreen trees and shrubs. The Chilean barberry is called the *Berberis darwinnii*. *Artemisia richardsonii* is a little flower which grows, coincidentally, on the coast



ARBUTUS BERRIES
Photo: Brenan Simpson

of Banks Island in the Arctic, named after the same Joseph Banks. And here on the Gulf Islands we have the most beautiful of all our native trees, the *Arbutus menziesii*, along with several other species such as the Flase Azalea, *Menziesia ferruginea* and a lovely little blue larkspur, which I have seen on Pender but not yet on Mayne, the *Delphinium menziesii*.

As a footnote, Banks, Menzies and the others were followers of a long tradition. When another English Captain, Martin Frobisher, reached the coast of Labrador in 1576, he sent some of his crew ashore with orders to search the land and bring to the ship 'whatsoever thing they could find...in token of Christian possession'. Some brought flowers.

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



MENZIES LARKSPUR
Photo: Brenan Simpson

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