

# WEEDS

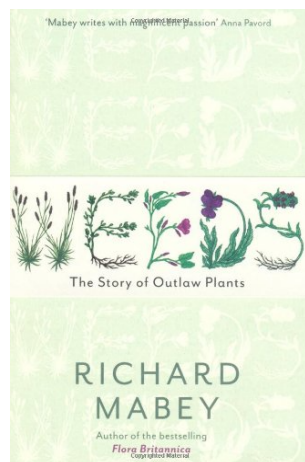
## The story of outlaw plants

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Weeds? We know them as dandelions, buttercups, daisies, poppies, cornflowers and so many others. Weeds may be defined as plants that have the habit to grow at the wrong moment in the wrong place! They often turn up where earth

has been disturbed. The seeds may remain dormant over long periods, for several tens of years, and sprout when the ground is worked or cleared. As Richard Mabey describes, weeds have evolved along with the plants people cultivate for food; whether vegetables, grain and rye, or herbs for medical use or food seasoning. Weeds have evolved to ripen simultaneously with the cultivated plants and the shape and size of their seeds has evolved to resemble the cultivated plants with which they grow together. By this imitation process their survival is best secured.



Richard Mabey dedicates successive chapters to the first written records describing weeds, their medical use, as well as the evolution of weeding techniques, starting by pulling in pre-historical times, later by hoeing and recently by spraying with chemicals.

Then he gives a review of weeds as they appear in literature and poems. Apparently hundreds of weeds are cited by Shakespeare in his works. As an example, "A Midsummer Night's Dream" is cited. In this tale the juice of the wild pansy is dripped into the eyes of the sleeping. The effect is that they will fall in love with the first person they see when they awake. Apparently this was based on local lore known and understood by Shakespeare's contemporaries. A local name for wild pansy was "love-in-idleness". In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, New York's Central Park grew all the plants cited in Shakespeare's various works. The next chapter is dedicated to weeds in paintings, such as greater plantain in Albrecht Durer's painting "Large Piece of Turf".

But weeds are also associated with war. The famous poppies of Flanders, ever since the First World War, associate the red colour with blood-stained fields and rebirth of nature after the carnage. Another association with war is the purple sea of rosebay willowherb that sprang up from bomb craters, after London was firebombed by the Germans during the Second World War. The fire and the water sprayed by the fire-fighters gave the warmth and humidity for the germination of the seeds. The rosebay was called bomb-weed. Rumours went that the bombs contained these seeds and that some kind of biological war was at hand.

During the imperial period of the UK, seeds and plants were brought in from all over the world. This was both for science as well as for commercial reasons; whether for industrial (rubber), medical (cinchona) or ornamental (rhododendron) use of varieties unknown in the UK. However some seeds came to the UK in more accidental ways, such as Canadian fleabane which arrived in the stuffing of a North American bird.

Richard Mabey also traces how plants travel across the UK. For example Oxford ragwort was first grown in the university's botanic garden (1794). Some seedlings climbed the wall. Later it was noticed a few streets further on, until by 1830 it reached the railway station. After which it spread along the railway network. The downy seeds would float into the carriages with travellers getting in, and leave with them for their various destinations. More recently plants travel along highways in the slipstream of cars and trucks. Even more with the spreading of salt in winter time, some weeds, usually limited to the seashore, now appear along the roadsides of motorways.

Of course some of the immigrant weeds are invading species without their natural predators to keep them in check. But on the other hand, some exotic weeds live an ephemeral existence in waste dumps. As Mabey says:

*"Occasionally I went on "alien hunts" organised by the Botanical Society of the British Isles. This was a euphemism for coach tours round east London refuse pits, which in those pre-recycling days were the sites for indiscriminate dumping of every kind of rubbish from abattoir waste to plastic toys."*

They would find cucumber and dahlias, watermelons and tomatoes, as well as coriander and buckwheat.

In the course of the book, the invasion of foreign species also comes up in futuristic and doomsday literature, where 'Triffid,' a genetically-engineered weed, becomes a rampant carnivorous plant that eats humans. This chapter leads Richard Mabey to reflect on invading species. He wonders whether we should rather accept them, just as we would be tolerant to the immigration of foreign people - except of course for the few killer species that come without their natural ecosystem. He wonders whether, after a few generations, a new, richer equilibrium is found. We tend to forget that Celts and Romans brought foreign species to the UK, which we now take as native.

If you are not scared off by the countless names of flowers you may not know in English and which you may need to look up so as to know what they look like, this book is certainly very interesting. Richard Mabey, writes in a fluent and descriptive way. Indeed this is not his first book on flowers and plants. His experience as a radio commentator provides that he certainly knows how to keep you interested. I liked a citation of John Ruskin:

*"We usually think of the poppy as a coarse flower; but it is the most transparent and delicate of all the blossoms of the field... the poppy is painted glass; it never glows so brightly as when the sun shines through it. Wherever it is seen - against the light or with the light - always, it is a flame, and warms the wind like a blown ruby."*

As well as one of Mabey's own descriptions:

*"Bee orchids... they seemed ... to be ornaments of porcelain and velvet, that had been mysteriously animated by the sun."*

Finally Mabey compares weeds in the city to a kind of living graffiti: impertinent and streetwise, living one step ahead of real-estate developers.