

International Rock Gardener

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This month we present a “special edition” written and photographed by one of the original editorial team of the International Rock Gardener, J. Ian Young. Ian, a former President of the Scottish Rock Garden Club, has also served as a local group Convenor and Show Secretary. He and wife Margaret, IRG Editor, spent many years exhibiting their fine alpine plants at SRGC and AGS shows, with considerable success and have been greatly involved in the SRGC website, Forum and social media pages for a long time. Ian wrote his weekly Bulb Log Diary on the SRGC website from 2003 to 2022 and from then until end 2025, the Bulb Log appeared monthly. In 2015 Ian began making videos of his garden which like the Bulb Log, have been enjoyed by many thousands around the world. As time has gone on, age has begun to catch up with our intrepid exhibitors and gardeners and thus Ian has made considerable changes to the way he maintains and regards the garden space around the house. He often refers to himself now as a “weedy gardener” and these pages contain the story of how time, and Covid restrictions, have impacted his thoughts on these matters.



J. Ian Young in the garden - image by Julia Corden.

["Erythroniums In Cultivation"](#) is an e-book written by J. Ian Young (2016) – free to all.

Cover image: *Cirsium vulgare*, image by J. Ian Young.

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The Adventures of a Weedy Gardener : text and photos J. Ian Young



A glorious 'weed' – *Cirsium vulgare*.

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In our quest to seek out the beautiful plants and rarities from across the world we may be guilty of not appreciating the range of plants that are on our own doorstep.

I speak of the wildflowers that seed and grow all around areas near our home, many call them weeds but what exactly is a weed?

It is often said that a weed is a plant in the wrong place. To me the term weed seems derogatory, and I think it is more is a learned attitude of mind. There are no 'weeds' they are wildflowers some may be native others have been introduced. Yes, many are very successful in spreading themselves around by seed which if not controlled could become a problem in a garden, but it is relatively easy to control seeding by dead heading as soon as the flowers fade. Some also spread out by stolons and are more difficult to control, even the tiniest part of root can become a plant, these can be very invasive to the detriment of other plants.

When I was young my interest in plants was fired by the wildflowers of Scotland especially those I saw at the seaside or when I was hill walking. The plants that grew in these harsh often rocky habitats had to adapt and survive exposure to extreme weather and can well be included in the 'Rock Garden' category.

Many of us are guilty of paying vast amounts of money to travel to far flung places to marvel at the foreign flora while disregarding the very plants that grow all around us, some of which originated in the far-flung places. This is an appreciation of some of them.

During the Covid 19 lockdown we were restricted to being out for an hour of exercise and had to stay close to home. We are lucky that there are a number of wild/ natural areas within a ten minutes' walk of our home.



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One of these is a small area of woods surrounded by fields that have not been cultivated since the 1960's when they were used as a market garden with large plantings of Daffodils harvested for cut flowers. After we lost our last wee dog Molly, I took my small compact Panasonic camera out on a walk, in place of the dog and the majority of the following pictures were taken either at or on my way to and from the 'woods and fields'.

The pictures mostly appear in the order that they were taken starting in February and are a celebration of the value of these plants to the local biodiversity.



These Snowdrops are most likely a remnant from the market garden days they are a form of *Galanthus nivalis* and are among the first flowers to appear; they are a very popular garden plant.



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Petasites hybridus (Butterburr) is among the first to bloom with the flowers being a valuable source of food for any early flying insects. Their very large leaves appear later shading out the

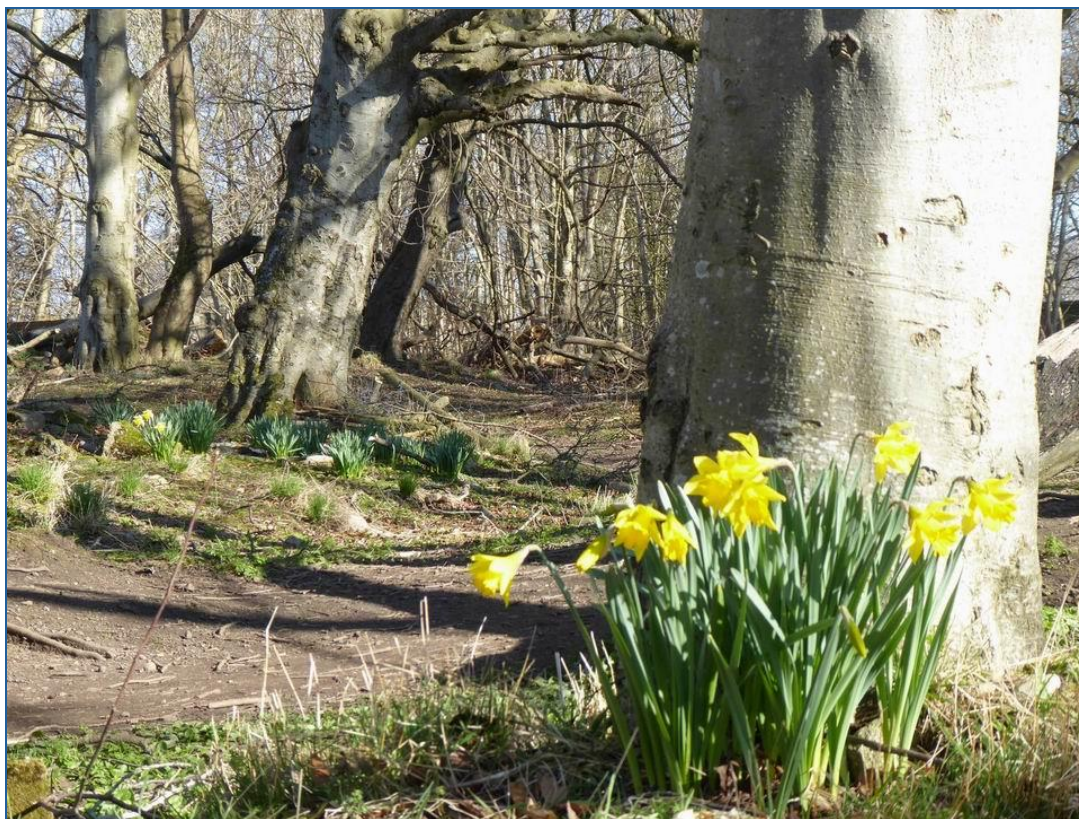


ground below which along with its thick, creeping underground rhizomes that spreads out over large areas makes it an unwelcome invasive plant in many habitats and not suitable for the garden unless you have a very large estate.

Petasites coming into flower.

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There are a few different forms of *Narcissus pseudonarcissus* (Daffodils) scattered across the area again these are survivors from the market garden days. From where they are growing, some appear to have seeded rather than the majority that have bulked up by division of the bulbs.



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It is interesting to observe how these bulbs have naturalised happily across a range of habitats from the open fields to the woods and are still flowering after all these years without being divided. I should point out that they do not flower well every year - depending on the weather the bulbs can take time to grow back to a size that is able to produce flowers.



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Some of the Narcissus have even found their way to growing on top of the old, crumbling walls that are now mostly covered with growths of moss, grasses and a range of plants all the way up to trees that have also taken root in the wall.



Ficaria verna, below, commonly known as the lesser celandine, is often the earliest plant to flower: its first flowers sometimes blooming before the end of February. Because it can spread rapidly this plant is mostly shunned by gardeners categorised as a weed but it flowers and dies back underground very early before most garden plants require the space and it does bring some welcome colour and a food source for pollinators in the earliest parts of the year, so I am more relaxed about it. There are some cultivar forms of this available.



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Ficaria verna, lesser celandine



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Symphytum tuberosum, the tuberous comfrey. This seems to be a vigorous plant spreading out underground to cover quite large areas so I would hesitate to introduce this to our garden but will continue to admire its place in this wild setting.

Symphytum tuberosum



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Anemone nemerosa, the Wood anemone, is a big favourite of mine. It flowers early putting on a great display in the woods; after flowering it sets seed and retreats underground before many other plants even start into growth. I have seen various degrees of pink flowers in the wild some of which may be down to environmental factors rather than genetics - there are many garden selections and hybrids with *Anemone ranunculoides* available.



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It is easy to propagate by breaking bits of the thin brittle rhizome like roots that grow out forming spreading clumps. It can also be raised by seed, but it will be three or more years before you get flowers.



A large patch of *Anemone nemerosa* growing along with some *Crocosmia* that someone has dumped over the wall from their garden and these have taken a hold.

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Claytonia sibirica (Pink purslane) is a plant introduced in the 1830's from the Pacific Northwest of America and it thrives in the cool moist woodland conditions of Scotland. Many plants have

been introduced to Scotland from this part of the world and due to the similarity to our weather most grow successfully.



The *Claytonia* mixes well with *Allium ursinum* which enjoys similar growing conditions.

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Claytonia sibirica

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The Bluebells also flower around this time but sadly these are not the native form *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* but a mixture of hybrids with *Hyacinthoides hispanica*. Despite the fact they are not 'pure' they still deliver a beautiful spectacle flowering alongside and mixed through the Wild garlic, *Allium ursinum*.



As the season progresses Bluebell flowers join the *Allium* bringing great colourful carpets to the woods and hedge row.

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The woodland is a magnificent sight when the Wild garlic and Bluebells are in full glorious bloom.



Allium ursinum

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In the right light even *Rumex obtusifolius* and Juncaceae, Broad leaved Dock and Rushes growing here in wet grassland put on a spectacular display.



Veronica officinalis (Speedwell) creeps about in the drier grassland where its small blue flowers call out for my attention as I walk by.

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The common Daisy is one of the plants that many people try to eradicate from their lawn. It should never be dismissed as a 'weed'. Its flowers are not only attractive but once again they add to the biodiversity offering a food source for the insects. How many of us have sat on the grass on a warm sunny day making daisy chain necklaces?

In my opinion Daisies (*Bellis perennis*) and buttercups add great interest and beauty to what would be a boring 'lawn' without them.



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Who does not like the Primrose? In my view there is no better species in this family than *Primula vulgaris*. Some may equal it in beauty, but few are as suited to growing in our garden conditions.



These are part of a very old estate planting that has been naturalised for around 150 years and there are a number of pink forms represented.

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It is informative to see where they seed themselves, often growing right up to the buttress of the tree roots where you would think it too dry for them to thrive.



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Myrrhis odorata (Sweet cicely) is the first of the umbellifers to flower in the fields and woods. With its umbels of white flowers held proudly above the attractive soft ferny foliage it is my favourite of the early umbellifers.



It sits proudly, standing out among the other emerging growths where its flowers grab your attention from some distance away.

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Myrrhis odorata forms attractive clumps and only seeds gently around and we have added this to our garden.

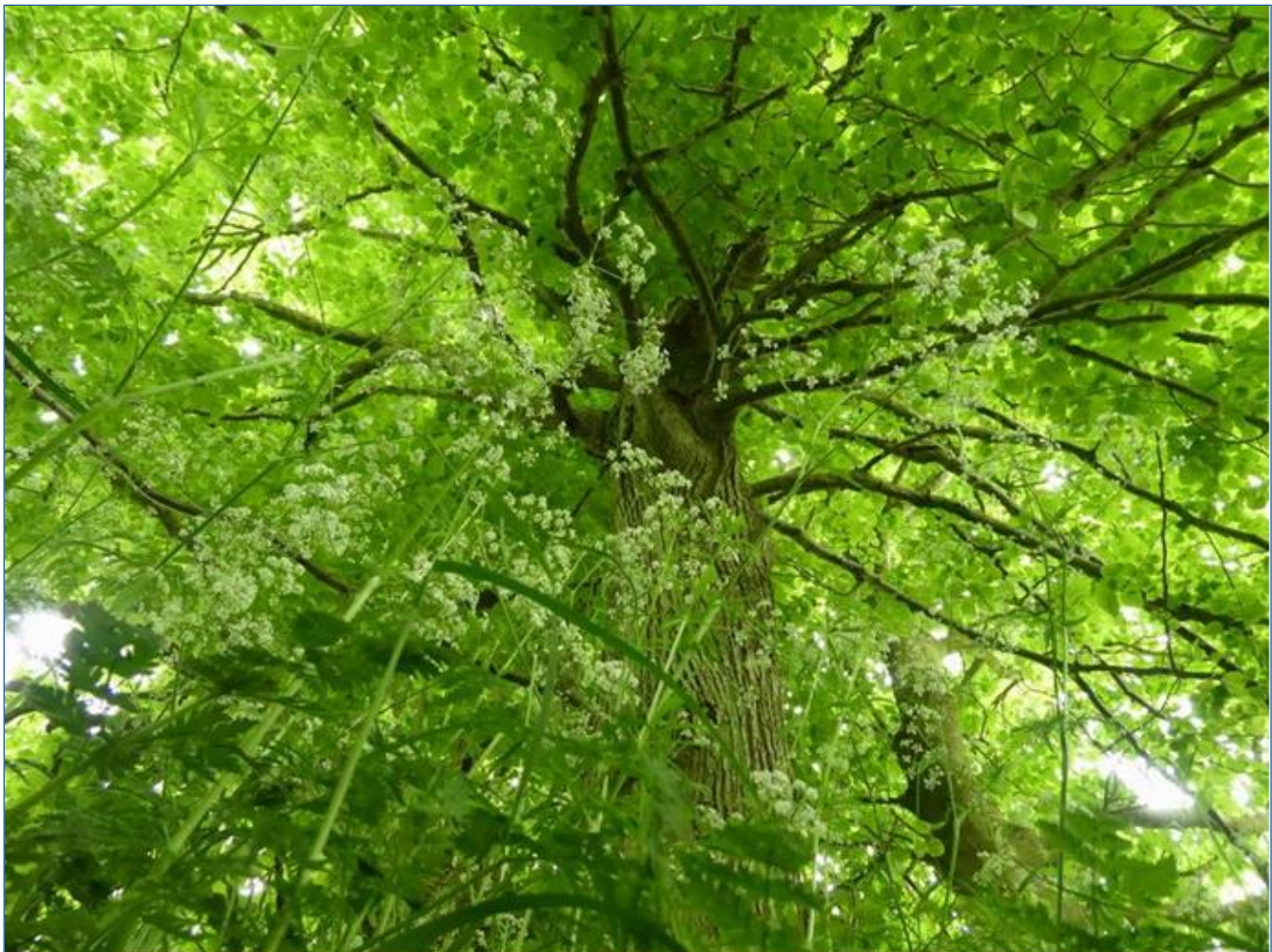


The mass flowering of *Anthriscus sylvestris* (Cow parsley) is next to appear. This plant has covered a much larger area and perhaps that should be a caution when considering it for the garden. I have raised some from seed and it has been flowering in the garden for a few years now. It spreads only by seed which is easy to limit in a garden by removing the flower heads when the flowers fade.

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Anthriscus sylvestris is equally at home lining the path under the shade of trees as it is carpeting the open spaces.



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I often see the Roe deer as we both forage in these woods and fields.

*Aegopodium
podagraria*
commonly
called Ground
elder, flowering
in front of a
Sambucus
(Elderberry)
shows the
similarity
between the
leaves and the
flowers which
lead to the
common name.



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Aegopodium podagraria spreads by vigorous stolons as well as seed which makes it unsuitable for the average garden. While this is not a plant that needs protection, a mass spread of flowering plants such as this is a valuable habitat in these fields forming a green lung on the edge of the city where wildlife can thrive and that needs to be protected.

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The last of these striking umbellifers growing in this area is the tallest in flower *Heracleum sphondylium* is a Hogweed shown here pushing up above the Ground elder. It should not be confused with the very invasive Giant hogweed.



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Alliaria petiolata (Garlic Mustard) is not what you could call a spectacular plant when seen individually but when it appears flowering in groups at the base of a tree or in the shade, I find it very attractive.



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Alliaria petiolata

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Cardamine pratensis (Cuckooflower) in the same Brassicaceae family as the previous plant, flowers before the grasses get growing and I often find it growing along with *Taraxacum officinale* (Dandelion).



This is a different area that I pass on my way back home that I will describe a bit later, but it hosts wonderful plantings of Buttercups, Dandelions and Cuckooflower.

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Dandelions and Cuckooflower.

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The mass flowering for the Dandelions is a beautiful spectacle and always cheers me up even on a dull day.



After the flowers come the classic Dandelion clock seed heads.

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Dandelions clocks and Buttercups.

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There are a several members of the Buttercup family some flower early in the year but in summer it is *Ranunculus acris* that stands out for me where it appears like a yellow haze among the grasses.



We have grown this in the garden for many years, and it has never become a nuisance in fact it does not increase as much as I would like it to.

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Ranunculus reptans, the creeping buttercup, is more invasive and despite the beautiful display created by its flowers its spreading growth means it is not the best species to consider for the garden.



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As the weather warms up the grasses grow taller and while I am not familiar with the taxonomy of the grasses I am able to understand there are many types of grasses, sedges and rushes growing in the abandoned fields creating a superb habitat for the local wildlife including many deer, butterflies, insects and dog walkers.

The spires of
Foxglove flowers
(*Digitalis
purpurea*) rising
up through the
taller grasses
brings back
memories of the
warm days of
summer.



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Digitalis purpurea

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I have never studied the Grasses and Sedges sufficiently to identify them, but I know enough to observe that there are several genera and species each colonising the ground that is wetter or drier as appropriate to their needs. Here White clover (*Trifolium repens*) finds a home among the finer grasses.



Looking carefully, you can also find Redclover (*Trifolium pratense*).

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My eye focused in on a distant purple haze among the grasses, which on getting closer, I found was the lovely *Vicia cracca* twining on to the taller grasses and plants as it scrambles up to display its attractive racemes of flowers.



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Vicia cracca

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Nearby I also found the yellow Meadow vetch (*Lathyrus pratensis*).



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On my route I pass a grass covered reservoir which in summer turns into a beautiful wildflower meadow of Orange Hawkweed (*Pilosella aurantiaca*) and a yellow Hawkweed. I get confused trying to identify the different yellow Hawkweeds there are large groups of 'microspecies' but I find them all attractive plants.



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The top of the slopes is crowned with Ox-eye daisies (*Leucanthemum vulgare*)



Leucanthemum vulgare

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Sadly, the water authority does not share my appreciation of nature and willingness to let plants grow and just a few days after I took the colourful pictures of the flowers in the grass once again it was all mowed down. Regrettably, they do this every year, and I suspect it is more to do with scheduling work rather than any consideration for enriching nature.



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I took all the following pictures at a site where they had demolished a local primary school, crushing any concrete and rocks and rubble which they spread to form a hardcore across the site. I have been enjoying observing what I saw as my own experiment of this scree / steppe type habitat here on our doorstep in Northeast Scotland. The plants that appeared were every bit as attractive and fascinating as some of those from exotic steppe habitats of the worlds. It is just their familiarity to us and the ease with which they can spread themselves around that may cloud our appreciation of them.



There were some established areas of grass around the perimeter but other than that it was at first devoid of any plant growth. The usual pioneering plants were the first to arrive: Dandelions doing what they do, seeding everywhere. It was of course the plants whose seed can arrive on the wind or was deposited by birds that appeared as there was no human intervention.

It was fascinating to observe how an area like this if left alone could be populated by such a range of plants. I visited daily as the flowers turned what was an all but temporarily abandoned patch of land into a valuable biodiverse and attractive habitat for the local wildlife.

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Mats of White clover, *Trifolium repens* started to spread out across the coarse gravel surface. This cover aided other plants to establish which could also benefit from the nitrogen stored in the Clover root system.



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A range of plants from the Daisy family with yellow flowers appeared after the main flowering of the Dandelions was past: among these I found *Hypochaeris radicata*, *Crepis capillaris*, and *Pilosella officinarum*, possibly more - I find them a confusing but attractive group of plants. The pioneering plants such as the clovers start to form spreading patches that create a home for others to join.



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White Clover, *Trifolium repens*, is one of a number of members of the Leguminosae, Pea family.

The smaller flowered lower growing *Trifolium repens* was more widespread, while the larger taller growing *Trifolium pratensis* stood out with its large red flowers, seen in the next two images.

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Red Clover, *Trifolium pratense*



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A less showy member of the Leguminosae in the form of *Medicago lupulina*, often found in lawns, forms very low mats covered in clusters of tiny yellow flowers.



The masses of glossy yellow flowers of *Ranunculus reptans* make a spectacular display.

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Ranunculus reptans

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The same patch that the Dandelions turned yellow earlier in the year, is once again painted yellow; this time by the Buttercups with a few remaining dandelion clocks hovering above the yellow carpet.



Some plants of *Anthriscus sylvestris*, Cow parsley. appeared among the taller grasses along with *Rumex obtusifolius*.

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The combinations of plants formed a beautiful natural wild garden that if transposed to Chelsea Flower Show would not seem out of place now the more natural style of gardens is being adopted.



I even found some Barley, (*Hordeum vulgare*) a staple crop in Scotland, rising majestically above surrounding herbage.

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The barley looked simply stunning and reminded me of some of the modern prairie style garden plantings.

Other taller plants started to appear including *Rumex obtusifolius*, (Common Dock), and *Tanacetum parthenium* (Feverfew).



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The first few *Cirsium arvense*, Creeping thistle, started to appear but as the common name suggests and the next picture shows they will soon spread out to colonise very large areas.



Cirsium arvense



Cirsium vulgare

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I knew weeks earlier that *Cirsium vulgare* was coming. The thistle is the national flower of Scotland. Legend states that it became the national symbol after a barefoot Norse soldier stepped on a thistle during a surprise attack, alerting the sleeping Scottish warriors and saving them from being defeated. Seeing this early stage of the plant the spiky rosettes lying flat on the ground you can imagine exactly how that could have come to pass



The growth of the thistle *Cirsium vulgare* soon gathers pace no doubt fuelled in part by growing along side the Clover until it is covered in buds that open in turn revealing their flower that is very familiar to at least all Scots.

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Another interesting development was seeing how the different plants established across the site. The larger ones clustering together into what I suspect was the richer ground with just a shallow layer of the hardcore rubble while the lower growing mat-forming plants spreading out over the harsh scree-like ground.



The yellow *Jacobaea vulgaris*, synonym *Senecio jacobaea*, is a very common wildflower in the family Asteraceae that can appear in almost any habitat of the city or countryside. Although it is shunned for its toxic nature to livestock it is a very decorative plant.

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Here the two, thistle
and ragwort,
combine creating a
very attractive
vision.



I have enjoyed visiting or at least walking past this site since 2021 enjoying the progress of nature in action always knowing that all that I find beautiful was going to be destroyed when

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the developer moves in. At least I have the small concession that it is much needed affordable housing that is going to replace my wilderness garden and I still have the other much larger areas shown here.



The diggers moved in, and I imagined or wished they were creating an undulating landscape that could grow wild but they were just preparing the ground in advance of the houses going up.



All the plants have been scraped away and the topsoil piled up at the far end of the site.

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The services start to go in.



How things were.....

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The magnificent wildness of how things were.

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There could not be a derelict site without *Buddleia davidii*. The Butterfly bush is one of the most commonly seen plants that seed widely on demolition and building sites.

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So, all this beauty is gone, trashed in the name of development, but I am heartened by having seen how in relatively few years a wild garden like this can form and the knowledge that there

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is a massive seed bank from all these plants stacked up in the piles of top soil some of which they will spread across the new development. As for the woods and fields they hopefully will stay as they are partly protected from developers by a line of electricity pylons taking our wind generated power south.



As I walk, I am rarely alone: even when there are no dog walkers I am watched over by the local wildlife, such as this Kestrel, one of the many raptors that I see among the wildlife.