

# Tale from the Garden

## Bramble or Blackberry?

A bramble is any rough, tangled, prickly shrub, usually in the genus *Rubus* which grows blackberries, raspberries, or dewberries. "Bramble" is also used to describe other prickly shrubs such as roses. Bramble or brambleberry sometimes refers to the blackberry fruit or products of its fruit, such as bramble jelly. 'Bramble' usually refers to the common blackberry, *Rubus fruticosus*, which grows abundantly in all parts of the British Isles and harvesting the fruits in late summer and autumn is often considered a favourite pastime. An especially hardy plant, bramble bushes can also become a nuisance in gardens, sending down strong suckering roots amongst hedges and shrubs and being particularly resilient against pruning. Many consider *Rubus fruticosus* a weed due its tendency to grow in neglected areas and its sharp, tough thorns which can be hazardous to children and pets.



The bramble forms an underground, perennial rootstock that throws up new shoots in the Spring. These have a two-year 'life span'. In the first year, growth is vigorous and vegetative. If the tip of the shoot meets the soil, then it may develop roots and form a daughter plant. The leaves on these first-year shoots are compound and palmate (that is like an open hand) with 5 – 7 leaflets. In the second year, lateral shoots develop which bear the flowers. The leaves on these lateral shoots are somewhat smaller. They often have 3 – 5 leaflets. The leaves have been used in various herbal remedies. The flowers form in late spring/early summer and are white or pale pink and have five petals and numerous stamens. The fruit, the blackberry, develops from these flowers.

The fruit of the bramble is the blackberry, but in a strict botanical sense, the blackberry is not a berry. Each tiny juicy 'blob' on the blackberry represents a tiny fruit or drupelet, and there are many of them, so it is an aggregate fruit (a collection of tiny fruits!). A drupe is a fruit that has a fleshy, outer part that surrounds a stone or seed. So, a drupelet is a tiny drupe!

Blackberries have formed part of the human diet in Western Europe for thousands of years. Examination of 'Haraldskaer woman' indicated that blackberries formed part of her diet. The Haraldskær Woman (or Haraldskjaer Woman) is the name given to a bog body of a woman preserved in a bog in Jutland, Denmark, and dates back to about 490 BC. Blackberry seeds are often found in the human waste unearthed at archaeological digs.

Apart from us as a species, the bramble is a significant source of food for many insects and mites, with some species feeding exclusively on bramble. It is also important to dormice, who eat their flowers and fruit. They, and other animals/birds, seek refuge in bramble thickets. The leaves also represent a food source for deer, whose browsing may affect the development of bramble thicket. High numbers of deer can result in a reduction in the amount of bramble and consequently, the amount of wildlife in a given area. On one hand, it can offer protection from grazing/browsing to young tree seedlings but equally it can suppress the development of light loving species.

## 5 juicy facts about blackberries and brambles

- Fruit or phone? The Oxford Junior Dictionary defines a blackberry as a mobile phone rather than a fruit! Today BlackBerry is a smart phone, called after the fruit because the inventors knew that any name related to the term "email" made people's blood pressure rise, so they went for a natural, playful, happy-memory inducing name.
- The Devil's fruit - In ancient British folklore, it was believed that blackberries should not be picked after Old Michaelmas Day (11th October). This was the day that was said to be when the Devil fell

from heaven landing on a bramble bush ripe with blackberries and cursing the fruit as he fell. It was believed this caused blackberries to become unpalatable around 29 September (St Michael's Day).

- It wasn't uncommon for bramble bushes to be planted around graves. Their spiky exterior was used to protect the graves from unwanted animals grazing as well as the old superstition of blackberries being able to stop the spirits of the dead from rising out!
- Healing powers - During the American Civil War blackberry tea was used to cure dysentery. More than one ceasefire was reportedly called for the purpose of picking blackberries, and Confederate and Union soldiers would pick blackberries together, often from the same bush at the same time. Other healing powers have also been ascribed to the bramble bush. It was once believed that passing sick people several times through the loop formed by a bramble branch could cure them of conditions including rickets, whooping cough, hernias and rheumatism!
- Bramble detectives - Brambles are a useful tool in forensic botany because of where and how they grow. Brambles have a really nice, rhythmic growth pattern which is why forensic scientists use the plant to help establish how long human remains have been at a crime scene. The bramble can be an indicator of changed ground & its growing pattern can show signs of disturbance,
- Hundreds of species - There are over 330 species of bramble in the UK. This helps explain why not all blackberries taste the same.

Brambles are a common reminder that nature is not just about us. The tangled confusion of spikes and tough stems scratch flesh and tear cloth alike - the long, sinuous creepers creeping along tracks can trip those whose eyes stray from the ground.

On the other hand, 'Brambly Hedge' is a series of illustrated children's books by Jill Barklem, recounting the adventures of a community of mice who live together in the tranquil surroundings of the English countryside. The tales tempt children to the underworld of the bramble where the homely mice families create a secure glow of domestic bliss safe from the dangers outside.

These two aspects, adversary & protector, remind us of the dual nature of the bramble as both tormentor and giver of soft treats.

So, this week, we look to the humble bramble and what the church can learn from it.

- ✓ Brambles occur despite human action; in fact, they often occur where humans vacate a place and leave it alone. It reminds us that God is at work despite ourselves, and it is the church's role not to be God, rather to find where He is at work and join in with whatever He is doing.
- ✓ Brambles are messy, organic, unsightly, have hard thorns and basically can be said to lack elegance... perhaps the church at its best should have these qualities as well. If Covid-19 has taught us nothing else then the church is not about the beautiful buildings, even the music we sing together, and how we come together on a Sunday, but it is very much about the bigger, more messy community that is built around it (good and bad).
- ✓ Brambles provide a brilliant protective eco-system for smaller animals and wildlife. They shelter and protect them from larger predators (including humans). Perhaps the church should play this role, rather than seeing itself for what it does itself, it should see success in a much wider way as to what it contributes to the eco-system as a whole, what it protects and looks after.
- ✓ Finally, brambles produce brilliant, sweet fruit not just for humans but also other wildlife to feed off and does so freely and indiscriminately. Do we give what we have freely & without discrimination?

Although Aesop was a Greek pagan, many of his Fables clearly illustrate the truths of life in this world.

Here's one that we as Christians might connect with, as exemplified in Proverbs 13:8, "A man's riches may ransom his life, but a poor man hears no threat."

The Fable of the Fir Tree and the Bramble:

A Fir-tree was boasting to a Bramble, and said, somewhat contemptuously, "You poor creature, you are of no use whatever. Now, look at me: I am useful for all sorts of things, particularly when men build houses; they can't do without me then." But the Bramble replied, "Ah, that's all very well: but you wait till they come with axes and saws to cut you down, and then you'll wish you were a Bramble and not a Fir."

MORAL

Better poverty without care than riches with!