

## Evening Meeting: Shakespeare's Flowers

Michael Brown, MA in Garden History, took us through an intriguing glimpse into Shakespearean history and gardening. The first gardening books appeared in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, containing plans for fashionable knot gardens. These originally used lavender, wild thyme, sempervivums, and other hardy plants to create the shapes. Paths were contrasted with crushed chalk, shells or crushed tiles and were watered too. Michael demonstrated an Elizabethan "watering pot". A large garden would have taken quite a while! Hyssop was often used but as it dies off after 3 years it became replaced with hardy box.

Shakespeare was well versed in folk law, old wives' tales and herbal medicine, and used this to effect in his plays, particularly the poisons. Mandrake root made a potion used as a sleeping draught or anaesthetic, referred to in Anthony and Cleopatra. Hemlock, dug up during the full moon for greater potency, was a sleeping draught or poison and used in "The Scottish Play". Opium poppy draughts soothed Othello when guilt for killing Desdemona robbed him of sleep. Juliet takes too much Belladonna and sleeps so soundly that Romeo takes her for dead with tragic consequences. Yew has poisonous leaves and seeds, but the red fleshy part is edible. Eating the berries induces vomiting which spreads the seeds. It was used to make English Longbows (Henry V) and was valued but planted in graveyards to keep it away from livestock. Bitter wormwood cleared intestinal parasites, and used as gripe water for babies. Saffron was more expensive than gold, and for the rich only.

In the days when there was little bathing or hygiene, people carried posies of sweet-smelling flowers (nosegays) to ward off "bad air". Pinks are so called not for their colour but because the edges of the petals are frilled and look as though they have been cut with pinking shears.

Violets were associated with the Virgin Mary and symbolised purity, while pansies or heartsease were also known as "love in idleness" and symbolized longing. Pansy comes from the French "penser" meaning thought. Herb of Grace, Ruta graveolus, was used in exorcism. Roman slaves were sent out to gather Rue (Coriolanus) which kept away insects, but the sap gives a nasty photosensitive burn. Roses were used in pot pourri, and distilled for rosewater in food. Symbols of love, but with thorns so beware! Eglantine roses are similar to dog rose but have scented leaves and colourful hips used to make rosehip syrup. Daisies or Day's eyes, so called because they open early in the morning, were used in medicine as the leaves packed into wounds stopped bleeding. Many more examples were truly interesting, and this was an unusual and revelatory talk.