



Plants to look out for in July



Bedstraws

The Bedstraws are a family of plants that get their name from the fact that they have pliable stems and make fragrant hay when dried – so historically, several species were used to stuff mattresses. Cleavers / Goosegrass / Stickyweed (*Galium aparine*) is probably the best known species of this family, so if you want to get to know the bedstraws, you can start by using this plant as your guide. **Notice that it has several whorls** (a whorl is a bit like a skirt where the panels haven't been sewn together) of 6-8 leaf-like structures (they're not all strictly leaves) around the stem. This is the defining feature of this plant family – all species have whorls of 4 or more 'leaves' arranged along the stem.



All Bedstraws sprawl to a greater or lesser extent, due to their weak stems. Their flowers are very small, usually white or yellow. Woodruff (*Galium odoratum*), smaller than Cleavers, is a common sight locally, carpetting the floor of our chalk woodlands. It was in flower in May, and June, and is now starting to develop its small globular green fruits – if you see it in the woods, **notice how the fruits are similar to those of Cleavers**.



Hedge Bedstraw (*Galium mollugo*) – photo left

Hedge Bedstraw grows to 1.2m, as does Cleavers, but it is more bushy in appearance. It also has **white flowers, but they are more conspicuous than those of Cleavers, growing in far larger, more showy clusters**. There are a similar number of 'leaves' to each whorl, but they are **noticeably shorter and stouter than those of Cleavers**. It is a common plant, found in grassland, hedgerows, verges, and scrub.

Ladies Bedstraw (*Galium verum*)

In flower now until the end of August, this is one of the **yellow-flowered Bedstraws**. It can grow to 1.0m. Less common in our area than Hedge Bedstraw, this species particularly favours dry grassland and can be found in meadows and on hedge banks. It is not certain whether the plants in our area are truly native or are 'garden escapes'.

Bryony – a little bit on plant names...

Both Black Bryony and White Bryony grow locally in our hedgerows. The common names of plants often provide us with clues about their historical uses, or the way that they grow – but they can never be relied upon to give us information about how they are related. Bryony is a perfect example! The Latin name 'Bryonia', from the Greek 'βρύω'νία', means to swell, teem with fruit, be full, and to abound. Both species have whitish flowers, trail themselves through scrub and hedgerows, and bear shiny red berries of similar size, which festoon the hedgerows in autumn. All in all, this is probably why history has afforded them the same name. They are, however, totally unrelated – White Bryony sits in the cucumber family, and Black Bryony is the sole British member of the tropical yam family!



White Bryony (*Bryonia dioica*) – photo left

While similar in appearance to a grape vine, with its tightly spiralled tendrils and ‘palmate’ leaves, don’t be fooled - all parts of this plant are poisonous. It has separate male and female flowers, with the female flowers measuring about 1 cm across and having **5 sepals and 5 petals**. After pollination, the female flowers develop into red berries.

Black Bryony (*Tamus communis*) – photo right

This plant is related to the lilies, and as such it doesn’t have distinguishable sepals and petals, but rather **6 ‘tepals’ make up its flowers**. Like White Bryony there are separate male and female flowers – the female flowers being only 5mm or so across. Its leaves are similar in shape to the spades in a pack of cards – and this is how I remember which bryony is which, because spades are black.



Burdock (*Arctium*)

This much-branched plant grows up to 1.3m tall and has **strikingly large leaves** near its base, which resemble rhubarb. **Thistle-like purple flowers** will emerge from their bristly buds later this month. Seeds are dispersed by ‘hitch-hiking’ as they are held in a **seed-head covered in tiny hooks**, which readily stick to animal fur. The root is used in the drink ‘Dandelion and Burdock’. It is a common plant, found at the edge of woodland, in field borders and on waste ground.



Hedge Woundwort (*Stachys sylvatica*)

I chose this plant because it is one of those stinging nettle impersonators – the main photo shows Hedge Woundwort on the left, and a stinging nettle on the right. **Notice how the leaves of the Hedge Woundwort are less deeply toothed at their edges than the nettle**, and generally less angry-looking. If the **leaves are rubbed, they emit a unique and pungent smell** – once learnt, never forgotten! In flower you can easily see the difference between the two plants – Hedge Woundwort has beautiful, purple, ‘lipped’ flowers, in contrast to the drab, grey-green catkin-like flowers of the stinging nettle.



Enchanter’s-nightshade (*Circaea lutetiana*)

Our local woodlands have been carpeted with a progression of different flowers, from Dog’s Mercury and Ramsons, to Bluebells and Woodruff – it is now the time for our final plant this month, Enchanter’s-nightshade. Growing up to 70cm tall, with leaves in opposite pairs, the delicate white / pink flowers of this plant appear between June and August. I lifted the plant in this photo from my garden – note the **conspicuous bright white stolons** (creeping underground stems), which help it to spread. It is a native plant of ancient woodland, and can be found in shady moist spots.

