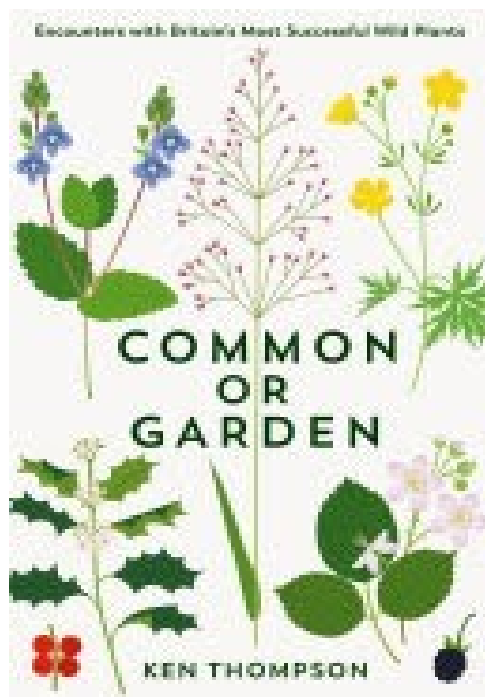


Book Review

Common or Garden by Ken Thompson



This fascinating book takes you on an extremely interesting journey to help explain why some wild plants, those we are most likely to come across, are so successful.

Ken is an expert gardener and biologist and although some of the science can be quite challenging (for me) Ken writes in an engaging, witty but understandable way. I have spent most of this year waging war with bindweed, goose grass and couch grass, not to mention slugs and snails, however I can't but admire the ability of some plants to evade my efforts and their persistence to proliferate.

By quite a complex process, Ken has chosen 50 wild plants that flourish across the UK. He delves into the origins of their common names, folklore, forgotten uses, hidden compounds and the science behind their extraordinary success. His book is quite a revelation

and has given me a much greater understanding and even appreciation of some of my opponents.

Ken notes that our relationship with common plants acquired over centuries is gradually being lost and we are less connected with nature than we used to be. Our ancestors made do with whatever happened to be growing in the neighbourhood. One of Ken's examples demonstrate there were few things that you couldn't do with nettles.

For food:- In Rob Roy, Walter Scott has an old gardener who raised nettles under glass as early spring kale, Samuel Pepys enjoyed nettle porridge and traditionally nettles were used as a substitute for rennet. Nettles are still used to wrap Cornish Yarg cheese and The National History Museum has even produced a Nettle Cookbook.

For fibre:- the bast of nettle contains phloem fibres found under the surface of the stem. It is believed that French soldiers wore uniforms made of nettle fabric during the Napoleonic wars and later during WW1 in Germany nettle fabric was produced when cotton was unavailable. Now a Swiss company supplies nettle yarn blended with other fabrics.

So many other uses:- soundproofing, geotextile for stabilising slopes (with added fertiliser), replacement for fibreglass... the list is endless. Each chapter homes in on one or more plants that are succeeding in a particular way and that you wouldn't have difficulty in finding.

My only negative opinion concerns the illustrations that appear to be digital and really lack the plant details described. In any other context they would work well.

Certainly a book for the long winter evenings ahead.

Marilyn Leech