

# Linnaeus in the Fields

by Gareth Evans



*The tightly packed beds of the garden with Linnaeus's house in the background.*

If Carl Linnaeus had an answering machine in his 18th Century Uppsala home it would have attracted despairing messages. Too busy in his great task of classifying all the realms of nature he exasperated his friends and colleagues from around the world by his lack of response. *Dr Linnaeus are you there?* Even one of his oldest supporters, the Englishman Peter Collinson, had to be polite, but to the point: "My good friend I must tell you frankly that it is a general compliant that Dr Linnaeus receives all and returns nothing, as I love and admire you, I must tell you honestly what the world says".

This 'home truth' probably did not perturb Dr Linnaeus for long as he was a man with a mission. He had been brought up in a pious rectory in the county of Småland in southern Sweden, where his father inspired his son with his own avid

interest in botany and gardening. His father had named the family after a notable linden tree on their land. The young Linnaeus had found patronage, and later in life had always been delivered from both dangers and disease – protected and spared so that he could reveal the structure of divine creation to the world. The results of his single-minded project was set out in his many publications which include *Genera Plantarum* (1737) and *Species Plantarum* (1753) editions of which are now recognised as the starting point for the modern scientific naming of plants.

Linnaeus eventually held the Professorship of Botany, Pharmacy, Semiotics and Diet at the venerable University of Uppsala where he had been a student himself. One of his responsibilities was the University's botanic garden. This three-acre garden is

now preserved as *Linnéträdgården*, a historic botanic garden restored to the layout and contents of Linnaeus's tenure. Within the garden's wall stands the professorial house (*Linnémuseet*) which gave him and his family a home. He had revived the quality of the garden after a previous period of neglect with the help of his dedicated and well-travelled students. Immense care was taken to grow species in this northerly garden that had been introduced to Sweden from explored lands around the globe, not least North America whose flora has a bed of its own. Today, walking through the well-filled beds is like browsing through one of the encyclopedic botanical volumes of the 18th century that were inspired by the Linnaean system. Its illustrated pages spilt around the visitor's feet, jostling for space along the maze-like paths, vivid with colour and associations. Linnaeus's influential publications were based on the

species in this garden which he described as a living library of plants. An impression that is helped in modern Uppsala by the walled boundaries providing a quiet and leafy sanctuary for the town's students, workers and pensioners.

The system of classification promoted by Linnaeus was simple, and is well explained in the modern exhibition in the reconstructed Orangery. Fundamentally, it could be performed by anyone who could count the sexual parts of a flower (stamens and pistils). It gave botany a much needed structure, and was popular as Linnaeus's imagery could be easily assimilated, despite being accused of "lewdness" for example, *Polyandria – 20 males or more in the same bridal chamber with one female*. Although his system was superseded by more flexible "natural" systems, the surviving by-product of Linnaeus's project is his use of two-word Latin names (binomials) to describe most natural entities. Simpler to use than the previous multi-worded Latin descriptions it did however mean that like the biblical Adam, Linnaeus had to coin a lot of new names. This he seems to have relished, honouring both friends and colleagues. "Before long" thundered the 18th century English, "the whole of botany will consist of Swedish proper names".

Within his homeland Linnaeus is also revered for his accounts of his travels through Sweden, mostly sponsored by the country's parliament. With hindsight the resulting publications have a modern "ethnobotanical" element for he did not just record the observed species, but he was to take the trouble to search out how the local people made use of them. Linnaeus was the right man for the job and his engagement with his subject matter went further than his brief: "The farmer's botany is not to be despised" Linnaeus wrote in Gotland where he took a "good-natured" farmer into the meadows. There he noted down the local flower names which "often had very nice origins", such as *Laketunga* (healing tongue) for adderstongue used as an anti-inflammatory, and *Fagelblomma* for the wood anemone which blossoms at the time to collect brushwood, or "to fuga". At Virestad, in Småland, Linnaeus



*The Orangery, the centre structure was a cool greenhouse which provided winter housing for Mediterranean plants.*

recorded a stand of royal fern (*Osmunda regalis*) where the "wise woman Ingeborg every morning rows over the river to fetch power from this plant".

Linnaeus urged young physicians to travel in their own country, where "he will hear of many remedies, unknown elsewhere, in use among the country people ... for during the consultation the patient may reveal the secret, if the physician is prudent and makes use of a little art". This was written in 1742 a year after he had the opportunity to travel to the Baltic islands of Öland and Gotland off the southern coast. The only limestone terrains within the granite-filled borders of Sweden, they were as famous for the poverty of their inhabitants as they were for the richness of their flora. 1,150 different species have been recorded on the 80-mile long island of Öland alone, and its herb-filled verges can still impress the most casual tourist with its collection of viper's bugloss (*Echium vulgare*), chicory, ladies bedstraw and St John's wort. The island's spring orchids delighted Linnaeus, as did the Burren-type district of Alvaret to the south, where he collected unique plants to stock the Uppsala garden. No wonder he thought that cultivating medicinal plants there would be more profitable than any other part of Sweden. To record the amount of species he found there Linnaeus's account of his tour, (*Öländska och Gothländska Resa* 1745) was the first publication where he used binomial names. Thanks, apparently, to the restraint on the use of herbicides now

placed on Swedish public bodies you can still find verges as Linnaeus described them. Beautiful and varied, they are simply staggering.

Linnaeus started his 1741 tour in the spring, recording as he went a hamlet where the cottagers strew meadowsweet and double narcissi on their floors. For economic reasons he carefully recorded many local uses of dye plants; apple bark for a lemon colour, a beautiful yellow from juniper moss (*Cetraria juniperia*). As a physician he recorded with interest what the farmers used as remedies; butterwort (*Pinguicula vulgaris*) to wash their children's heads "which kills the lice and makes the hair grow". He set down in detail the use of a decoction of wood anemone in beer followed by turpentine for *Colica Hypochondriaca*. "This remedy" he commented "however simple and strange it may seem, cured the patient".

A character as full of apparent contradiction as Linnaeus continues to be chewed over by historians and biographers up to this day. But underlying the storms and ambitions of his life there is a clear love nature and of the flora in particular.

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#### FURTHER READING

*Linnaeus's Öland and Gotland Journey 1741.*  
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