



# The One With The YELLOW LEAVES

It's strange, really, that we often don't know the names of the wild flowers that grow near our homes or some of the birds in our gardens. Caroline Buijs discovered that a whole new world opens up when we get even a smidgen of nature knowledge.



“In the first half of the 20th Century, it was still quite common to go into the great outdoors to pick wild plants”

When I used to go cycling through the fields with my 85-year-old father, he could effortlessly name all of the plants we saw: oats, barley, corn, etc. When we’d stop to eat a sandwich on a patch of grass, he knew the name of each and every wildflower. It never ceased to amaze me, because my own botanical knowledge is limited to: “It’s so lovely and green!”

According to Ria Loohuizen, author of the book *Van nature (From Nature)*, I’m not the only one who doesn’t really know much about what’s growing and blooming. Not only has the number of nature conservation areas been drastically reduced in my country, the Netherlands, in the past century, we have all, in the course of a single generation, become much more removed from nature, she says.

This bears out internationally. In 2013, a non-profit platform in the UK called Greeniversity conducted a survey asking people to identify the top skills people had 60 years ago that they felt were on the verge of being lost. The top three were: 1.) Repairing household items; 2.) Wildlife identification; and 3.) Foraging for wild food.

In the first half of the 20th Century, it was still quite common to go into the great outdoors to pick wild plants to supplement your diet, which was crucial in the harsh North European winters. Without refrigeration in those days, people had to get their vitamins from pickled foods like sauerkraut, salted beans and corned beef.

When spring came and you’d been eating this monotonous diet for months, you’d go foraging for nettles, sorrel and dandelions to get your greens and elevate your vitamin levels. Depending on the season, you’d use what nature offered: elderflowers, berries, wild garlic, blackberries, spearmint, chamomile, chestnuts, crab apples and more. Wild foraging wasn’t just about the food; it was a social activity.

Ria Loohuizen’s mother always went “into the fields” in the early spring with a group of others to gather food together. Loohuizen’s explanation for the demise of this practice is the rapid development of agricultural technology after the Second World War. Picking wild plants has become redundant, however, and as such the tradition of foraging has died out in a single generation.

#### THAT NICE BIG TREE OVER THERE

They say that children between the ages of five and twelve are particularly impressionable, and they’re equally impressed by nature. That, too, may explain my lack of familiarity with nature. The house I grew up in was once across the road from a field of heather, but it was soon replaced by a block of houses. A grass field right next to our home also bit the dust. Maybe that was when I lost interest: nature was mostly something that tended to disappear.

It didn’t help that my fuddy-duddy biology teacher had no talent for teaching us the wonders of nature. And the final blow came when I went to university in the city to study: nature became something for people who dressed in muddy colors and didn’t drink beer.

It wasn’t until I was 30 that I started to appreciate the joys of walking. I finally stopped asking, “Are we there yet?” and discovered that the whole point was the walking itself. Also, I noticed that my mind became pleasantly empty if I was surrounded by greenery. But what I was actually surrounded by, no idea! I could tell a poppy from a dandelion, but really didn’t know much more than that.

Victoria Price, a UK-based program officer in the conservation science team with Fauna & Flora International, an advocacy group that tries to protect endangered species and ecosystems worldwide, says that people used to have a lot more basic household knowledge about plants, in part

because we used to use our local plants for medicinal purposes. “People have lost information about animals and birds, but with plants in particular people just aren’t aware of how to identify the species anymore—let alone to identify its medicinal properties,” she says. “The decline of agriculture and the move away from the land has had this impact of people not knowing the plants they’re surrounded by.” Sometimes, the plants right around us can be incredibly useful—not to mention pretty.

And that’s a pity, because as Marjoleine de Vos wrote in the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*: “Knowledge is also a joy for its own sake. Knowing more about something makes the world a richer place. For example, to someone with a bit of botanical know-how “those pretty flowers by the road” are a lively mix of cow parsley, yarrow and yellow rattle. They actually see more and that enriches their lives.”

Journalist Caspar Janssen includes a beautiful description of what’s good about knowing more than “a nice shade of green” in his book *Ontpopt (Revealed)*.

“For years, I looked at dozens of trees, every day, without knowing any of their names,” he writes. “Some time last year I got fed up with it. To start with, I wanted to know what that ‘nice big tree’ right in front of my house was called. I had been calling it a willow, even a lime tree, and no one ever corrected me. I finally took a leaf off the tree and placed it side by side with the illustrations from a tree book. No question now: it’s a poplar. Small effort, great satisfaction. Since then, I’ve been getting to know all the trees and shrubs around me, and it’s adding new dimensions, new conversations and new stories to my life. Earlier, neighbors would say, ‘Lovely, all those trees.’ Now we discuss the colors of the chestnut and the goldenrain tree, the male and female catkins in the poplar, the blossoming of the magnolia and the rowan. Yes, you can definitely say that’s enriching. In any case it’s made me very happy.”

#### PAINTER’S SORROW

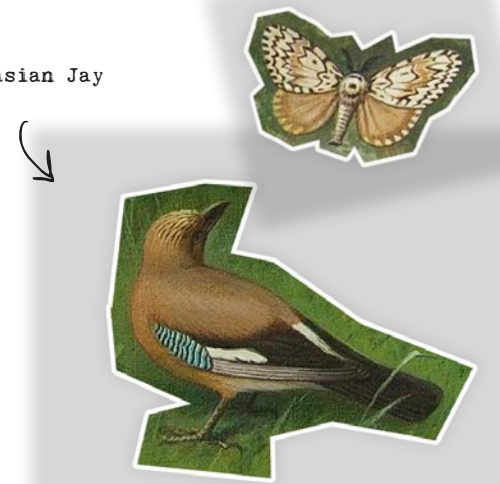
It’s thanks to my son’s school garden teacher Wim that my own need to know more about nature has grown so much in the past year. Wim knows full well that there are latent nature lovers among his pupils here in Amsterdam, and among the

parents of his pupils. He has fed my son’s enthusiasm for zucchini plants, potatoes and flowers like catkins and dahlias. He’s made up fun activities like Wim’s Wondrous Winter Carrot Weighing Contest. In short, he is doing exactly what the founders of nature education were saying should be done 100 years ago: making nature education tangible. As teachers, they would take their classes outside, and in every classroom there was an aquarium and a terrarium, because they were of the opinion that direct observation is the basis of all knowledge about nature. So what it all boils down to is looking at things properly.

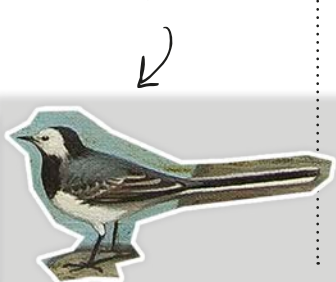
The names themselves are so interesting that that’s already reason enough to study plants. *Saxifraga x urbium* for example, is called “painter’s sorrow” in Dutch (*schildersverdriet*), because no painter ever succeeds in capturing its little flowers in oil paint. In English, it has various names, including London pride, St. Patrick’s cabbage, whimsey and prattling Parnell. ➔

“Direct observation is the basis of all knowledge about nature. So what it all boils down to is looking at things properly”

Eurasian Jay



Wagtail







## GREAT APPS FOR GETTING STARTED

The key to nature knowledge is going local: what's in your backyard (or on your street) is not necessarily what's in backyards everywhere.

So it's best to look for apps that are local. Here are a few examples of what's out there:

\* **Spotting Nature Worldwide:** An international website called [ispotnature.org](http://ispotnature.org) from the Open University lets users take a photograph of unknown fauna or flora, upload it to the site and ask the community to help identify and verify observations. It has about 50,000 users so far worldwide.

\* **Plants in France:** Pl@ntNet is an image-sharing database created in France. Snap a photo of a flower or plant you want to identify, and it can suggest to you what it might be from about 4,100 European plants already in its database.

\* **Leaves in the US:** A field guide developed by Columbia University, the University of Maryland and the Smithsonian Institution in the US, LeafSnap allows you to identify a tree using visual identification software. Just photograph the plant and it'll try to match up the image with the correct North American species.

\* **Aussie plants:** Trust Trees from the Australian National Trust allows you to explore a selection of the most important trees in Victoria that are listed on the National Trust's Register of Significant Trees.

"If you're interested in learning something about nature, you won't succeed if you're in a hurry"

TEXT CAROLINE BUIJS WITH ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY NINA SIEGAL  
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*Lychnis chalconica* is sometimes called burning love because it is so intensely red, and at other times, gardener's delight. Folk names for plants can also refer to the devil (hellweed), medicinal properties (plantain is called snakeweed in the US, because it's thought to cure snakebites), or to the season of the plant's bloom (summer beauty, autumn indigo) or its shape and appearance (foxglove, grape hyacinth).

What's also nice is that if you're interested in learning something about nature, you won't succeed if you're in a hurry. Dutch conservationist and botanist Jac. P. Thijsse knew this more than 100 years ago, when he wrote the booklet *Van vlinders, bloemen en vogels* (*About butterflies, flowers and birds*) together with E. Heimans: "Don't be impatient; if you haven't achieved your goal within ten minutes, make it fifteen, a natural scientist always has time. [...] If you have ventured out in quest of a Goldfinch, it is quite possible it will not show itself to you. But you may be rewarded for your troubles by the unexpected appearance of a flock of Snow Buntings, a Green Woodpecker or a Bohemian Waxwing."

### AHA! A MOORHEN

But then, how do you improve on your knowledge of plant names? Just starting to memorize random lists of flower names seems like an endless task. You usually learn things quicker if you are having fun doing it, and that's true with nature knowledge too, according to Victoria Price.

"There's loads of different ways to do it, especially now that there are so many identification apps you can download online; and then you can take it outside with you and just have a go," she suggests. "Also a lot of nature reserves, have educational programs that can take you bird watching or bug spotting, and they often have guided walks to identify trees. The environmental organizations and charities around you are a good way of starting to learn. Plus, there's a really active movement now concerning urban wildlife and green infrastructure to get wild landscapes into urban environments, which might be putting native species or herby plants into roof gardens or even inside apartments."

Deciding on what exactly you want to learn more about also helps. Birds, trees or butterflies? Or perhaps simply the

names of the flowers in your garden or on your balcony?

I started with the park where I go for strolls in my lunch break, deciding to learn three new names on each walk. Depending on the season, I might pick a leaf or a flower, and when I'm home I look it up to find out its name. Sometimes I take a picture of a bird I don't know. This way, I recently managed to identify a moorhen using my digital field guide. At home, my family teased me, and I know a moorhen isn't all that rare, but I didn't care. The joy of finding out for myself what the name is of an unknown—to me—bird, tree, flower or plant, that's what it's all about.

So the thing about learning more about nature, I now know, is largely a matter of observation. It helps you to look so much better. Which is good for other things, like drawing. And you also learn that nature doesn't abide by any calendar. As Jac. P. Thijsse wrote in the first *Verkade Album Book of Spring*: "It has not been decided yet, who will get to be the first to proclaim spring this year: the Song Thrush, the snowdrops or common hazel. One year it is the little bird, the next it is the shrub, or the flower. But whichever is first, they always know before any human, who looks at the calendar and thinks that spring appears on the 21st of each March." ●

