

STAR PERFORMERS

While trying to decide on a topic for this month's article, one plant in particular kept entering my mind – *Ornithogalum umbellatum*, a small bulbous plant from Turkey and the Middle East that has acquired the vernacular name of Star of Bethlehem. Several patches of this plant grow on the common at Southend where it has become naturalized having jumped a garden hedge many decades ago. Although short of stature and generally inconspicuous, this plant has brilliant white petals when in flower, which act like a beacon, drawing the eye to it in much the same way as the luminous celestial body, (related in the Gospel of Matthew), rose in the sky above Bethlehem to lead the wise men from the East to the manger where Jesus was born. Perhaps, it is the attention seeking luminosity of the petals that gave *Ornithogalum umbellatum* its common name, although it is generally believed to be because of its star-shaped flowers and (possibly) origins.



A completely different plant with star quality is Star Magnolia (*Magnolia stellata*). Its specific botanical name is derived from *stella*, Latin for star. The flowers of this Magnolia are much more divided than those of its relatives, *Magnolia x soulangeana* and *Magnolia grandiflora*, although its petals are not pointed, as stars are traditionally depicted. However, the effect of the flowers *en masse*, and when viewed from a distance, is quite star-like and when in full bloom there is no denying that this plant is a star performer.

A number of other plants have been assigned with the specific and vernacular names for star: Starry Campion (*Silene stellata*), Starry Saxifrage (*Saxifraga stellaris*), Starry False Solomen's Seal (*Smilacina stellata*), and even a species of rose (*Rosa stellata*). Other plants have acquired the Latin for star as their generic name. For instance, the genus *Stellaria*, which includes chickweed (*Stellaria media*), the bane of many a gardener, and the Stitchworts – Greater and Lesser (*Stellaria holostea* and *Stellaria graminea*, respectively), which adorn our road verges and waysides about bluebell time. All these plants have been named for their white star-like flowers.

The heavenly Star of Bethlehem is often interpreted as a symbol of purity, atonement and reconciliation and, traditionally, the little earthly stars that flower in our gardens and countryside signify similar qualities. Perhaps, in future, we will all look at chickweed in a new light.

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