

## Worcestershire's Wild Roses

Roger Maskew

To most people roses are colourful many-petalled flowers, or shrubs of various growth forms, artificially adapted to suit every situation in the garden. Such has been the degree of hybridization and selection that many thousands of varieties now exist, the majority of which are complex hybrids of unknown parentage. However, despite being widespread and common, Britain's wild roses are little known and generally referred to as 'Dog Roses'. Unlike many of the garden varieties they only flower for a short period during early summer, after which time they become a relatively inconspicuous part of the hedgerow and woodland edge vegetation. Until very recently both amateur and professional botanists avoided the study of wild roses having been discouraged by the bewildering array of forms they encountered in the field. The main reason for this is that virtually any species can pollinate another and, despite there being only a relatively small number of British species, at least sixty hybrids have been recognised so far. In over thirty years of studying the genus I have managed to identify thirty-two of these in Worcestershire.

Roses are mainly valued for their beauty and scent and the contribution they make to the adornment of gardens and public places. The hips of wild roses are a valuable source of food for birds; the first Waxwings *Bombycilla garrulus* I ever saw were feeding on them in the sand dunes of East Lothian. They also have a unique concentration of vitamin C, believed to be the highest concentration of the nutrient in any wild fruit in Britain.

During WW2, when the government realised the supply of vitamin C from citrus fruit was threatened, Dr. Ronald Melville, a wild rose expert based at Kew, first proposed the use of their hips as an alternative in the preparation of vitamin-C-rich rosehip syrup. With Dr. Magnus Pyke, a food scientist working on the chemical assay of roses, he became deeply involved in directing the development of the product. At the same time the Ministry of Health organised the collection of hips by volunteers on a massive scale. Melville's was an extremely important contribution to the dietary welfare of the nation at that time. The hips can also be used for making rose-hip jam, rose-hip tea, and even stewed into a pulp and eaten as a fruit dish; the Wyre Forest botanist George Jordan thought the hips of Sherard's Downy-rose were 'best for conserve and the dried leaves not a bad substitute for tea' (Jordan, 1864). In addition rose petals are a constituent of pot-pourri.

Wild rose flowers, with five petals, vary in colour from white to deep pink. The variation in colour can occur in all the species, such that this character cannot be used as a reliable means of identification. After flowering the receptacle, or end of the flower stalk, becomes deeply concave, forming a fleshy structure, the rose hip, which is a false fruit, totally enclosing the true fruits. Any attempt at identification can only be made in late summer after the hip is fully formed; the shape of the hip, the type of sepals and their position after the hip has formed, and whether they persist or fall early being vital information. There are other important characters that need to be noted also, in particular the shape and size of the stem prickles, whether the leaflets are glabrous or hairy and, if glands are present, which type.

Although a great number of hedgerows and scrub has been destroyed across much of lowland Britain during the last century, Worcestershire, particularly the north and west, together with neighbouring parts of Herefordshire and Shropshire, still has much good rose habitat. Woodland margins, unkempt field hedges, dismantled-railway banks and scrub in old quarries are some of the best habitats, although lane hedges are not so good these days, as the continuous trimming of them often makes it impossible to identify anything with certainty.

Following recent research, taxonomic and nomenclatural changes to the standard list of British wild roses (Maskew, 2017) has meant that fifteen native species of *Rosa* L. are now recognised in Britain.

Thirteen have been recorded in the county, and of the thirty-two hybrids recorded a few are widespread and, in some districts, often as least as common as the parent species, one or other of which may often even be absent.

All but two of the British species belong to section *Caninae*. These species have in common a climbing and arching habit and more-or-less straight stems which are strong enough to stand erect without support. Within section *Caninae* there are four subsections: Subsect. *Caninae* - six Dog-roses: strongly hooked prickles, glabrous or pubescent foliage, any glands present are of the non-odorous type.

Subsect. *Vestitae* - three Downy-roses: very hairy leaflets, many small sessile glands on all parts of the plant which release a not unpleasant resinous odour when crushed.

Subsect. *Rubigineae* - three Sweet-briars: conspicuous stalked glands on all parts of the plant which usually release a powerful fruity odour which on still sunny days can often be detected several metres away.

Subsect. *Stylosae* - a single species, *R. stylosa* (Short-styled Field-rose): long glandular pedicels, small hips with a distinctly conical top from which protrudes a long exerted column of styles.

The two remaining species are in different sections each containing just a single species:

Sect. *Synstylae* - *R. arvensis* (Field-rose): weak trailing stems which can form large sprawling masses often climbing over other vegetation, especially along woodland margins.

Sect. *Pimpinellifoliae* - *R. spinosissima* (Burnet Rose): erect shrub rarely more than a metre high, which spreads by suckering and can form extensive patches over wide areas, especially in coastal sand dunes; the only species with purplish-black hips.

In addition a few alien species have been recorded in the county, as either escapes from gardens and amenity planting schemes, or bird-sown shrubs in a variety of urban habitats. The most common of these is *R. rugosa* (Japanese Rose) with large hips, and large, often *flore pleno* flowers, that can range from deep purple to white; *R. 'Hollandica'* (Dutch Rose) is similar and often mistakenly recorded as *R. rugosa*; *R. glauca* (*R. ferruginea*) (Red-leaved Rose) and the very variable *R. multiflora* (Many-flowered Rose) are also occasionally found in similar places. It is worth mentioning that the emblems of the contending factions in the Wars of the Roses were two alien species. The White Rose (of York) is the hybrid *R. x alba*, and the Red Rose (of Lancaster) is *R. gallica*, both only rarely found as garden escapes.

The following list of Worcestershire roses includes the taxonomic and nomenclatural changes to the standard list of species referred to above, and in that respect is a revision of the account given in *The Flora of Worcestershire* (Maskew, 2014). The list includes brief comments on both the national and local distribution and abundance.

*Rosa* sect. *Synstylae* DC.

*R. arvensis* Huds. (Field-rose)

Widespread and common in wooded districts, but scarce or absent in many parts of the south-east. A southern species becoming increasingly less common further north in England and absent from Scotland.

Sect. *Pimpinellifoliae* DC.

*R. spinosissima* L. (Burnet Rose) (01)

Formerly frequent in the sandy districts around Kidderminster, but recently only recorded as a widespread escape from cultivation, apart from single sites on Bredon Hill and in the Beoley district where it probably occurs as a native relic. It occurs throughout Britain, mainly as a coastal plant, becoming increasingly scarce inland through loss of habitat.



01. *Rosa spinosissima* Burnet Rose. R Maskew

Sect. *Caninae* DC.

Subsect. *Stylosae* Crépin

*R. stylosa* Desv. (Short-styled Field-rose)

Locally frequent on calcareous soils and confined to the southern half of the county. Restricted to southern Britain, Worcestershire being on the northern edge of its range in western Britain.

Subsect. *Caninae* (DC.) H. Christ

*R. canina* L. (Dog-rose) vice *R. canina* L. incl. groups *Lutetianae* and *Transitoriae*

Widespread and by far the most common species in all parts of the county. Common throughout Britain, but less so further north.

*R. corymbifera* Borkh. (Hairy Dog-rose) vice *R. canina* L. group *Pubescentes*

Fairly widespread, but much less common than the common (Dog-rose) and appears to be rather scarce or absent in some districts.

*R. squarrosa* (A. Rau) Boreau (Glandular Dog-rose) vice *R. canina* group *Dumales* Widespread and locally common as in Britain as a whole.

*R. caesia* Sm. (Northern Dog-rose) vice *R. caesia* Sm. subsp. *caesia*  
There are no acceptable records for the county. Confined to northern Britain, reaching as far south as northern Staffordshire, with the odd record from Wales.

*R. vosagiaca* (N.H.F. Desp.) Déségl. (Glaucous Dog-rose) vice *R. caesia* Sm. subsp. *vosagiaca* (N.H.F. Desp.) D.H. Kent

Single bushes were found at three sites in the Barnt Green and Lickey districts in the 1990s, but by the early part of this century it was thought to have been lost at all three sites, only to be refound at one site in 2017, following scrub clearance. Also found in the Woodgate Valley as an obvious introduction in 2002. A northern species becoming increasingly rare further south, Worcestershire being on the southern edge of its range in England.

*R. tomentella* Léman (*R. obtusifolia* auct. non Desv.) (Round-leaved Dog-rose) vice *R. obtusifolia* Desv.

Widespread, but local with never more than a few bushes in any one site. Confined to the southern half of Britain, being most frequent in the midlands.

Subsect. *Vestitae* H. Christ

*R. tomentosa* Sm. (Harsh Downy-rose)

Locally frequent in the far west and the Wyre Forest district, and in woods east of Droitwich, very scarce elsewhere, and not yet

recorded from the extreme south-east of the county. A southern species, as far north as the north midlands.

*R. sherardii* Davies (Sherard's Downy-rose) (02)

Locally frequent in the east, particularly the Bromsgrove and Lickey districts, much less common in the west and appears to be absent across the extreme south of the county. Widespread and locally common in northern Britain as far south as the midlands, but further south confined to western Britain.



02. *Rosa sherardii* Sherard's Downy-rose. R Maskew

*R. mollis* Sm. (Soft Downy-rose)

Some doubt remains as to the true identity of a single bush (now virtually destroyed), originally suspected as being this species, which was first found in 1999 at a site in the west. A northern species, south to Staffordshire, with a few scattered records from Wales.

Subsect. *Rubigineae* DC.

*R. rubiginosa* L. (Sweet-briar)

Very local as a native plant of mainly calcareous scrub, being more often found as a bird-sown plant or escape in urban habitats, as across mainly southern England.

*R. micrantha* Borrer ex Sm. (Small-flowered Sweet-briar)

Very local and more or less confined to calcareous soils in a few places in the Malvern, Suckley and Martley districts in the west, and on Bredon Hill and in the Lenches in the south-east. A locally common species of southern Britain, especially south-east England.

*R. agrestis* Savi (Small-leaved Sweet-briar)

Only known in the county as a single bush on Malvern Common, and also recorded in 1998 as a certain introduction in Woodgate Valley Country Park. A very scarce species of southern England with an isolated site in north Wales.

Any Worcestershire members of the Botanical Society of the British Isles are entitled to send plant specimens to any one of the society's listed specialists/referees. I would gladly accept wild rose specimens from members who would be keen to take up an interest in the genus; collecting instructions are in the society's Annual Year Book. In addition I hope to run a field workshop somewhere in Worcestershire next year, as one of the BSBI's field meetings.

#### References.

- Jordan, G. 1864. *Flora bellus locus or the botany of Bewdley and its environs*. Unpublished MS.  
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Maskew, R. 2017. *BSBI News* 135:46.

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