

## May in January - the Glastonbury Thorn in Worcestershire

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01. Hedge showing the solitary flowering Glastonbury Thorn 3 January 2016. Wendy Carter.

On January 1<sup>st</sup> 2016, while travelling in a car over the M5 motorway bridge at Baughton with Ray Bishop, Harry Green and John Hodson, I noticed a hawthorn bush *Crataegus monogyna* in flower (01). On closer examination the plant was in leaf too, though the leaves were paler and sparser than those which appear later in spring. The mature bush was part of a roadside hedge planting scheme and judging from its stature had probably been *in situ* since the M5 was widened. (02, 03, 04, 05)

precocious leafing of hawthorns prompted by the very mild December 2015. However, although early leafing is common in hawthorns, winter flowering is very rare.



02. Hedge showing the solitary flowering Glastonbury Thorn 01 January 2016. Harry Green.



03. Flowers and leaves Glastonbury Thorn 01 January 2016. Harry Green.

A few days later, I noticed another hawthorn bush in flower at Martin Hussingtree near Droitwich, again a mature tree and almost certainly a planted specimen. Prior to these sightings, the only similar winter-flowering hawthorn I'd seen was in the 1980s when I recorded one in a planted hedge along Wilden Lane near Kidderminster. Shaun Micklewright has subsequently reported what is probably the same bush still blooming each winter and, as proof, sent me a photograph taken on New Year's day 2016 (06). On January 13th, I noticed another bush flowering in a hedgerow near the entrance to the West Mercia Police HQ at Lower Smite, though by this time, the situation was becoming clouded by widespread



04. Flowers and leaves Glastonbury Thorn 01 January 2016. John Hodson.



05. Flowers and leaves Glastonbury Thorn 01 January 2016. Harry Green.



06. Flowers and leaves Glastonbury Thorn Kidderminster. 01 January 2016. Shaun Micklewright.

One early-flowering hawthorn is very famous; the Glastonbury Thorn which once grew at Glastonbury in Somerset. The tree, known as the Holy Thorn, was first mentioned in the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century. It soon acquired the legend that it had sprung from a staff planted by Joseph of Arimethea reputed to be an uncle of the

Virgin Mary, who had supposedly visited the area between AD 30 and 63 (despite a lack of any evidence of his presence anywhere in England). Other whispers suggested that the plant was an offcut from the crown of thorns worn by Jesus and so cuttings from the original plant were revered by many. But according to Richard Mabey's *Flora Britannica*, the tree at Glastonbury received short shrift from the Puritans who, incensed by arboreal idolatry, hacked it to death. Its descendants continue to bloom in winter at places around the town, though their exact flowering period varies and can be as early as November or as late as March in harsh winters. Every Christmas a spray from the tree in St John's churchyard in Glastonbury is sent to the Queen.

What then are these peculiar trees which produce unseasonal foliage and flowers which few insects are likely to pollinate? We all like a good story, but today most botanists seem to agree that the winter-flowering thorn is a merely a genetic sport of the Common Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, known as "Biflora" because it flowers twice a year, once in winter and again in spring. The habit seems to be more common in Continental plants and so it is probably more likely to occur in imported plants. Although it comes true from cuttings, there is no guarantee that the Glastonbury Thorn will grow from seed. It is notable that several have appeared in Worcestershire during this mild winter, which suggests that there may be many more flowering undetected in corners of the county: all records are welcome.

#### Reference

Mabey, R. 1996. *Flora Britannica*. Sinclair-Stevenson, London.

#### Images

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