

Sweet chamomile, good times never seemed so good

Its dainty white flowers add sunshine to the garden and countryside; it will withstand drought and create a sweet-scented lawn that never needs mowing.

What's not to love about chamomile,
asks Deborah Nicholls-Lee





WITH its pristine white petals grouped around a yolk heart, chamomile adds cheer to our verges, cliffs and meadows in summer and releases a fruity fragrance when trodden underfoot. It's this sweet scent that explains its name, taken from the Greek word *chamaimelon*, meaning earth apple.

Beneath the dainty bonnet is a rather unkempt plant: a scrawny member of the daisy family with ragged leaves that goes from tiny tot to teenager in the blink of an eye, blossoming after only 10 weeks. Yet, with blooms that last all summer, chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*) brings a little sunshine to terrace containers or formal borders and also mixes in well with wildflowers in uncultivated areas of the garden. The German variety is taller and more aromatic than the English (often called Roman) type, but both are said to be a boon to gardeners, not least because pests are indifferent to them. The long-standing belief that planting chamomile beside ailing crops helps to revive them has earned it the epithet 'the plant's physician'.

‘I remember the smell. Working with the plants now takes me back to when I was younger’

This modest little flower can cure humans, too, and boasts a rich medicinal history. It's thought that, as early as 1500BC, the Egyptians were making a balm from its petals to treat dry skin. The Greeks, for their part, found it a helpful diuretic and digestive aid. The flowers and the roots were made into a tonic to combat fever, inflammation and ulcers and a chamomile salve was applied to soothe burns and cuts.

Later, the Anglo-Saxons listed it as one of nine sacred herbs, which, when accompanied by an incantation, were thought to have powerful healing properties. Chamomile's ability to calm has been celebrated for centuries and, today, dried or freshly picked chamomile, steeped in hot water, remains a popular sleep tonic.

For Jemma Draper, who has recently taken over the reins at Morehavens Chamomile Nursery in Hampshire, growing chamomile is extremely nostalgic. 'I remember the smell of the chamomile and I remember helping my grandfather to sort it in the greenhouse,' she says. 'Working with the plants now takes me back to when I was younger.' ➔

Sunny disposition: chamomile blossoms quickly and its blooms will last all summer

The family business, split between Farnham and Winchester and co-run with Mrs Draper's sister-in-law, Anna Piper, was founded in 1975, after a visit to the botanist Dorothy Sewart's chamomile lawn in Cornwall made a lasting impression on Mrs Draper's grandfather, Lt-Col Moore, who had never seen this non-flowering variety before. Enquiries made at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, to explain the anomaly were unsuccessful, but rumours of a chamomile lawn at Buckingham Palace finally led to an answer. A letter from the Queen Mother confirmed the presence of flowerless chamomile in the royal gardens, where the plant had evolved due to the strict mowing regime. It was concluded that Her Majesty's unusual specimens were the distinguished antecedents of the 'Treneague' variety championed by Sewart. Buckingham Palace's chamomile lawns are still tended by the royal gardeners today.

‘It’s a green area that gives off a lovely fragrance, especially if it has just rained’

‘Treneague’ continues to be sold by the nursery, alongside the dwarf variety, which is darker in colour, a little wispier and—ironically—slightly taller. Dwarf is also ‘less fussy,’ advises Mrs Draper, can tolerate a slightly less acidic soil and has ‘a more earthy, herbal fragrance to it’. Being non-flowering,



Tudor tradition: Vita Sackville-West's spongy chamomile seat at Sissinghurst Castle, Kent

neither can be grown from seed, but they are hardy perennials, tend to be more tolerant of our dry summers than grass and, above all, form a lawn that doesn’t need mowing.

‘It’s a green area in your garden that gives off a lovely fragrance, especially if it has just rained,’ she continues, adding that its pleasing texture and smell also lend it a sensory aspect that some clients find beneficial for children with special needs. It can be costly and time-consuming to plant a large expanse of non-flowering chamomile, but it is ideal for creating smaller areas of interest and softening hard edges, suggests Mrs Draper, who has seen the cushion-soft plant used on steps, around water features, between paving stones and even to create an outdoor dog bed.

Others adopt the Elizabethan tradition of planting a chamomile seat. In keeping with Sissinghurst Castle’s Tudor heritage, Vita Sackville-West (1892–1962) had her chauffeur create one in the Kent property’s herb garden. Constructed from stone salvaged from the castle ruins, the spongy seat is still admired by visitors decades later.

Chamomile also gets a mention on the Elizabethan stage. In Shakespeare’s *Henry IV, Part I*, the knight Falstaff explains to the future king that, unlike youth, a chamomile lawn thrives with wear: ‘I do not only marvel

where thou spendest thy time, but also how thou art accompanied: for though the camomile, the more it is trodden on the faster it grows, yet youth, the more it is wasted the sooner it wears.’

This year marks the 40th anniversary of chamomile’s most memorable literary appearance, when Mary Wesley’s wartime drama *The Camomile Lawn*, a tale of cousins reunited in Cornwall, entranced readers—and, later, television audiences—with its evocation of the kind of coastal lawnscape that Sewart may have had in mind a decade earlier. The novel opens with the young Sophy ‘lying on her stomach along the branch of the Ilex tree overhanging the camomile lawn’ taking in ‘a perfect view across the lawn to the cliff running down to the cove’. As war radically alters family life, the hard-wearing lawn where the cousins had played and that ‘smelt delicious after the heat of the day’ becomes a symbol of hope and endurance.

‘You planted it, didn’t you?’ Sophy asks her aunt in one scene. ‘Yes,’ said Helena remembering. ‘They all said it wouldn’t grow.’ ‘But it does,’ Sophy replies.

Morehavens Chamomile Nursery, Farnham, Surrey (01252 214074; www.camomilelawns.co.uk)

MARY WESLEY
THE CAMOMILE LAWN

‘A very good book indeed... has the texture and smell of real life, rich in detail, careful and subtle in observation, mature in judgement’

SUSAN HILL

A hard-wearing chamomile lawn is a symbol of hope in Mary Wesley’s wartime novel

In lovely KING CUPS there was CHAMOMILE TEA

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Dried or freshly picked chamomile steeped in hot water is celebrated for its calming properties

Cultivating your chamomile lawn

As Mary Crosse wrote in a 1963 article in the *Gardeners' Chronicle* exploring the history of non-flowering chamomile: 'It is a pleasant thought for those who make a chamomile lawn that they are perpetuating a custom of great antiquity.' Here are Morehavens Chamomile Nursery's tips for continuing the tradition.

• Allow 50 small bare-root plants per square metre (11sq ft) of lawn and plant from April to August

• Choose a sunny spot. 'Where grass grows well, it's likely that chamomile will also grow well,' says Jemma Draper

• A well-drained, light soil is preferable, but chamomile also does well

in clay if it is broken up with sand, grit or organic matter

- Prepare the area by weeding and removing stones. Cover with a 4in layer of topsoil

• Use a dibber to make little holes 4in apart and insert the bare roots

- For the first few weeks, water daily and cover with garden fleece. The plants will establish themselves quickly

- **Weed occasionally in the summer and autumn. If the roots are exposed, tread them down and add a little extra topsoil before the winter. There is no need to cover the lawn in the winter. If you get any gapping, add**

a little topsoil and tread down. More shoots will come in due course

- Fertilise sparingly to prevent over-growth. Avoid weedkillers

- **Although chamomile cannot withstand rough treatment such as cricket or football, light footfall on the lawn will extend its life and improve its appearance.**

Shakespeare was right

