The Ox-Eye Daisy

There is an old saying in England that spring has not really arrived until you can put your foot down on a dozen daisies at the same time. The saying refers not to the ox-eye daisy but to the flower that is known simply as "the daisy," *Bellis perennis*, the common little daisy in many an English lawn and one of the best-known of all English wildflowers. It is for this species that the common name was given—a corruption of "day's eye" since this little daisy opens its flower heads with the dawn and closes them tightly at night.

It would be hard to put one's foot down on twelve ox-eye daisies at once at any time of the year. However, it is the "daisy import" from Europe which has prospered most in the United States. Ox-eye daisies grow abundantly throughout the country, slightly less in the most southerly states but frequently elsewhere in great masses, in fields, along roadsides, in waste places and old pastures. It is known here as a weed, perhaps a dubious distinction, although in Gray's manual the description is somewhat tempered with the phrase "a beautiful but pernicious weed."

The plant is too big for twelve flower heads to go into one footprint. It grows up to three feet high with a slender, erect stem, usually branching towards the summit. Flower heads occur singly at the tips of the stems but, as with most members of the daisy family (Compositae or Asteraceae), each flower head contains more than a single flower. There are two kinds of flowers in the family, disk flowers and ray flowers, and they are combined in quite large numbers of either one or both types into flower heads. The ox-eye daisy has both types. The ray flowers are all female and are the white lobes resembling petals around the edge of the flower head. The yellow disk flowers, in this case both male and female, form a compact circle with a depressed center in the middle of the flower head. The scientific name for the ox-eye daisy, *Chrysanthemum leucanthemum*, means literally "gold flower, white flower," an accurate if unimaginative description!

Basal leaves are obovate, that is, wider at the tip than at the base, and spatulate, with stalks, and coarsely-toothed or lobed edges. Further up the flower stem, the leaves become smaller, more finely-toothed and have shorter or no stalks of their own.

Although a lovely sight in the fields, from late spring to late summer, masses of ox-eye daisies in the pasture are not especially welcome to farmers, particularly not if they are grazing dairy cattle. Too many ingested daisy leaves give an undesirable flavor to the milk. Sensitive people may get dermatitis from contact with the plant, and there is an old country story that eating the roots of daisies will stunt growth. Some European authors have written that the early leaves of many daisies can be used as salad, but there are a great many wild salad greens higher up on my list than the ox-eye daisy!

For the superstitious, it might be mentioned that dreaming of daisies in the spring and summer is said to bring good luck, whereas to do so in the fall and winter is bad news. Also, eating three flower heads after having a tooth pulled may guarantee that you will never have a toothache again. Now there's an insurance that would be worth having!