Of Plants That We Meet: Encounters and Connections

Institut
für Geschichte
und Theorie
der Architektur
und Stadt

Summer '25
Edited by
Tatjana Schneider
Yue Sun
October 2025

Contributions by Abdalruhman Alshehadat, Katja Heidmann, Kim Hennig, Yiwen Liang, Lina Marie Liebert, Denis Muratovic, Styliani Papaioannou, Yue Sun, Josephine Weigand

Technische
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Braunschweig

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This small booklet is a continuation of *Of the Plants That Live with Us: Names, Stories, and Care*, in which we brought together twelve stories of houseplants as the result of a teaching course and discussed human-plant interactions in the context of daily indoor life. This time, lured by the lush greenery of summer, we continued our course with a return to nature.

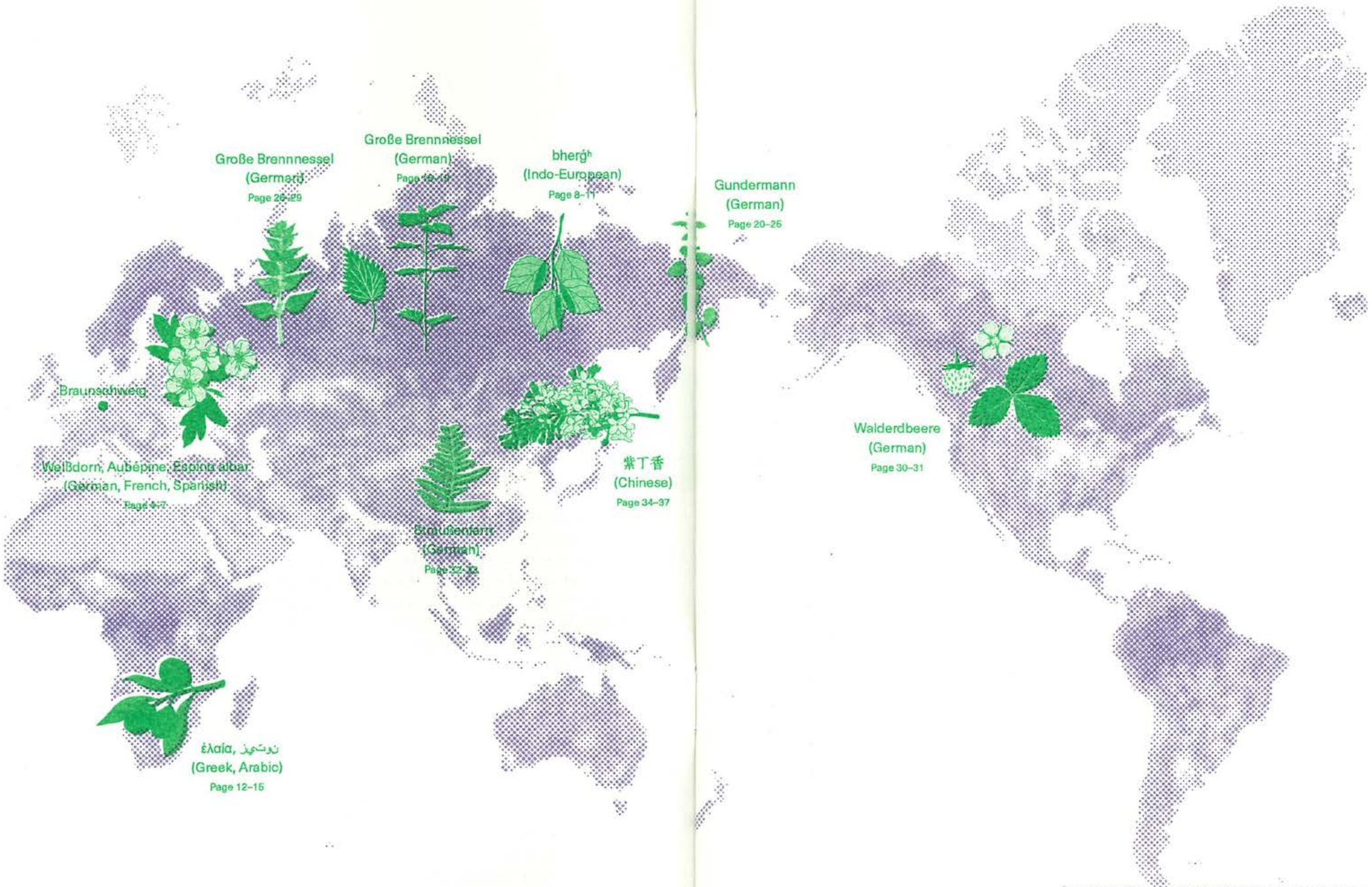
We adopted a deep-dive approach to establish one-on-one connections: each student visited a green space in Braunschweig and chose a wild plant of interest. As part of this approach, literature research and drawing were used to learn the common, botanical, and native names, as well as the uses, phenology, native habitats, and morphology of the plants. Mapping and interviewing were employed to explore spatial and social relationships between plants and people. In particular, storytelling brought out personal connections between the chosen plant and the student.

During the first meeting with students, when I asked the students "do you know any of the plants growing outside?", most shook their heads. This seemed to confirm the mainstream view that people are losing touch with nature. In fact, after putting the nine stories together, the situation is not that desperate. Some connections were already there. They just needed to be evoked, revealed, and reflected.

Fortunately, this small book captured these beautiful moments: a journey that began with a mistake, nostalgia for a lost mythological tradition, a shift from dislike to intimacy, nameless stinging pain, and regret over a past shame.

These connections are not only about the students and the plants per se, but also drift to families, hometowns, childhoods, and ethnic cultures. However, these connections were indeed once lost. Behind the loss are military conflicts, emigration, life pressures, and social prejudices.

We hope this booklet can save some of those tenuous connections and also foster new ones.



Data source of the native habitats: https://powo.science.kew.org/
Data source of the world map: https://openlandmap.org/ HILDA+ annual land use and land cover change (2019)

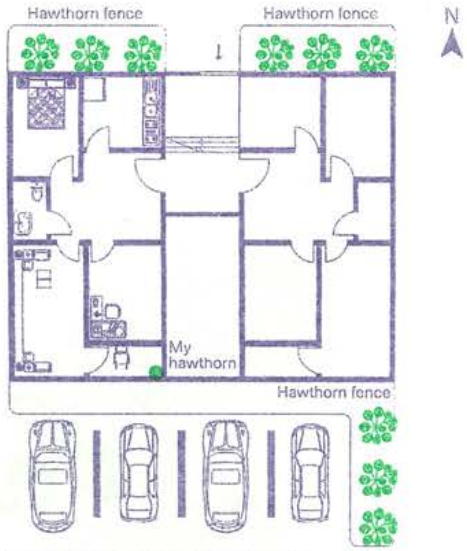
Protection

Abdalruhman Alshehadat

Hawthorn
Crataegus monogyna
Weißdorn, Aubépine, Espino albar

A journey from mistake to connection

When I moved into my new apartment in Soltau, I wanted to find a simple plant to decorate the balcony. I was looking for something that didn't need too much attention, because I don't have much spare time. Still, I wanted a plant that could bring some calmness and life into my home. One evening, after a long day, I went for a short walk around the building where I live. I wasn't looking for anything in particular, just some fresh air. While passing by a quiet corner between a wall and an old metal fence, I noticed a small shrub growing there. It had dark green leaves and thin, thorny branches. At first, I thought it might be a kind of jasmine, because the leaves reminded me of the jasmine plants from Syria. But when I touched them, I realised they were not soft or oily like jasmine. They were firmer and a bit rough. Curious, I picked one small leaf and took it home. I began researching online and eventually discovered that it wasn't jasmine at all, but hawthorn – *Crataegus monogyna*. What began as a simple mistake slowly became a growing fascination. I found myself more and more drawn to this resilient little plant growing quietly by the wall.



Layout of my apartment and its surroundings

Bringing hawthorn home

After learning about hawthorn, I wanted to have one on my balcony. I went to a plant market to look for it. The first plant I bought wasn't quite the same as the one I had seen by the wall, so I kept searching. After more research, I found a small hawthorn sapling that looked just right. The plant was about 40 cm tall, much smaller than those in nature, which can grow 6 to 8 metres high.[1] I planted it in a large pot and placed it on the balcony where it could get sunlight in the morning and fresh air in the evening. At first, it seemed a little out of place. But with fresh soil and care, it slowly started to grow. Hawthorn is not a demanding plant. It doesn't need daily watering or a strict routine. That fits perfectly with my busy life. Taking care of it feels natural and calm. It became part of my daily rhythm, a quiet companion in its own way.

The hawthorn I met in Prinzenpark

Family: *Rosaceae*
Height: Around 80 cm on my balcony; in nature it can grow 6 to 8 metres tall[4]
Phenophase: Leaves – April[5], Flowers – May to June, Fruits – September to November[6]
Habitat: Sunny to partly shaded areas, such as hedgerows, meadows, and forest edges[7]
Native to: Europe, North Africa, and Western Asia[8]

Flowers, buds, and leaves of hawthorn

Protection offered by hawthorn

Hawthorn has long been valued in herbal medicine. Its leaves, flowers, and berries have been used to support heart health and blood circulation.[2] People make tea from the blossoms and use the berries to make jam, tinctures, or even liqueur.[3]

In many European traditions, hawthorn is a symbol of protection. Its thorny branches were thought to ward off evil spirits and offer shelter. The plant itself represents a balance of strength and gentleness, standing firm and offering connection. This idea of "protection" also comes from its physical qualities. The dense, thorn-covered branches create a kind of natural barrier, which in the past was used to protect gardens, fields, and even homes. People planted hawthorn hedges to mark boundaries and keep animals or intruders away.

Growth in nature and at home

Watching hawthorn grow both in the park and on my balcony revealed the contrast between the two environments. In the wild, the plant can grow taller, spread out, and become part of a whole ecosystem, where birds may nest in its branches, bees collect nectar from its flowers (Katja shared with us that hawthorn is also called "buzzy tree" because of the lovely noise made by bees flying around it). This interaction supports biodiversity and shows that even a simple shrub like hawthorn can contribute to the environment. It acts as both a quiet protector and a provider for various species. At home, it remains small due to the limited space. Yet even in this confined environment, it brings calmness and natural beauty. It adapts to urban life, like many of us do. In that way, it becomes more than a plant; it becomes a quiet companion.

Discovering the park

Prinzenpark was the location our lecturer chose for this assignment. We were supposed to go there, find a plant, and study it closely. I hadn't spent much time in that park before, so this task gave me a reason to explore it.

While walking around and paying close attention, I noticed the same plant I had already seen near my home — hawthorn. It was growing along a fence near one of the walking paths. It felt special to see the same plant in a different setting, growing openly among other plants and wildlife. As I walked further, I realised how lively the park really was. Children were playing football, people were jogging, families were at the playground, and others were sitting at a café enjoying their coffee. The park was much more full of energy and life than I expected.

This visit gave me a new perspective on my hawthorn plant. In Prinzenpark, the hawthorn grows freely, much taller and is surrounded by wildlife. But even on my small balcony, the plant brings that same feeling of wildness and connection to nature. It reminds me of the outside world, while quietly living in the middle of the city.

1 "Crataegus Monogyna Hawthorn, Oneseed Hawthorn PFAF Plant Database," accessed August 18, 2025, https://pfaf.org/user/Plant.aspx?LatinName=Crataegus+monogyna.
2 "Hawthorn: Usefulness and Safety," NCCIH, accessed August 18, 2025, https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/hawthorn.
3 "Crataegus Sp. - Hawthorn," accessed August 18, 2025, https://eflora.neocities.org/Crataegus%20Sp.
4 "Crataegus Monogyna Hawthorn, Oneseed Hawthorn PFAF Plant Database."
5 "Crataegus Sp. - Hawthorn."
6 "Crataegus Monogyna Hawthorn, Oneseed Hawthorn PFAF Plant Database."
7 "Crataegus Monogyna | Common Hawthorn Trees/RHS," accessed August 18, 2025, http://www.rhs.org.uk/plants/4775/crataegus-monogyna/details.
8 "Crataegus Monogyna Jacq. | Plants of the World Online | Kew Science," Plants of the World Online, accessed August 18, 2025, http://powo.science.kew.org/taxon/urn:lsid:ipni.org:names:723820-1.

Fertility

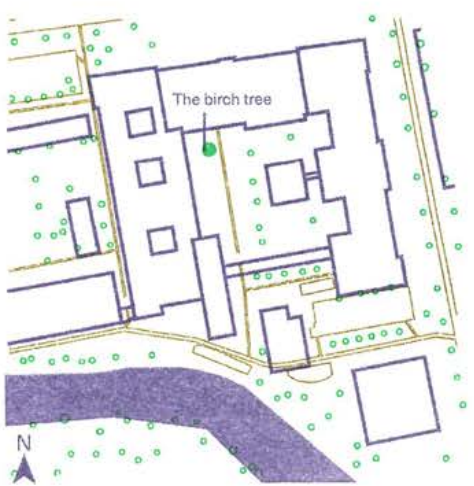
Katja Heidmann

Birch
Betula pendula
bherǵʰ (smooth and shiny)[1]

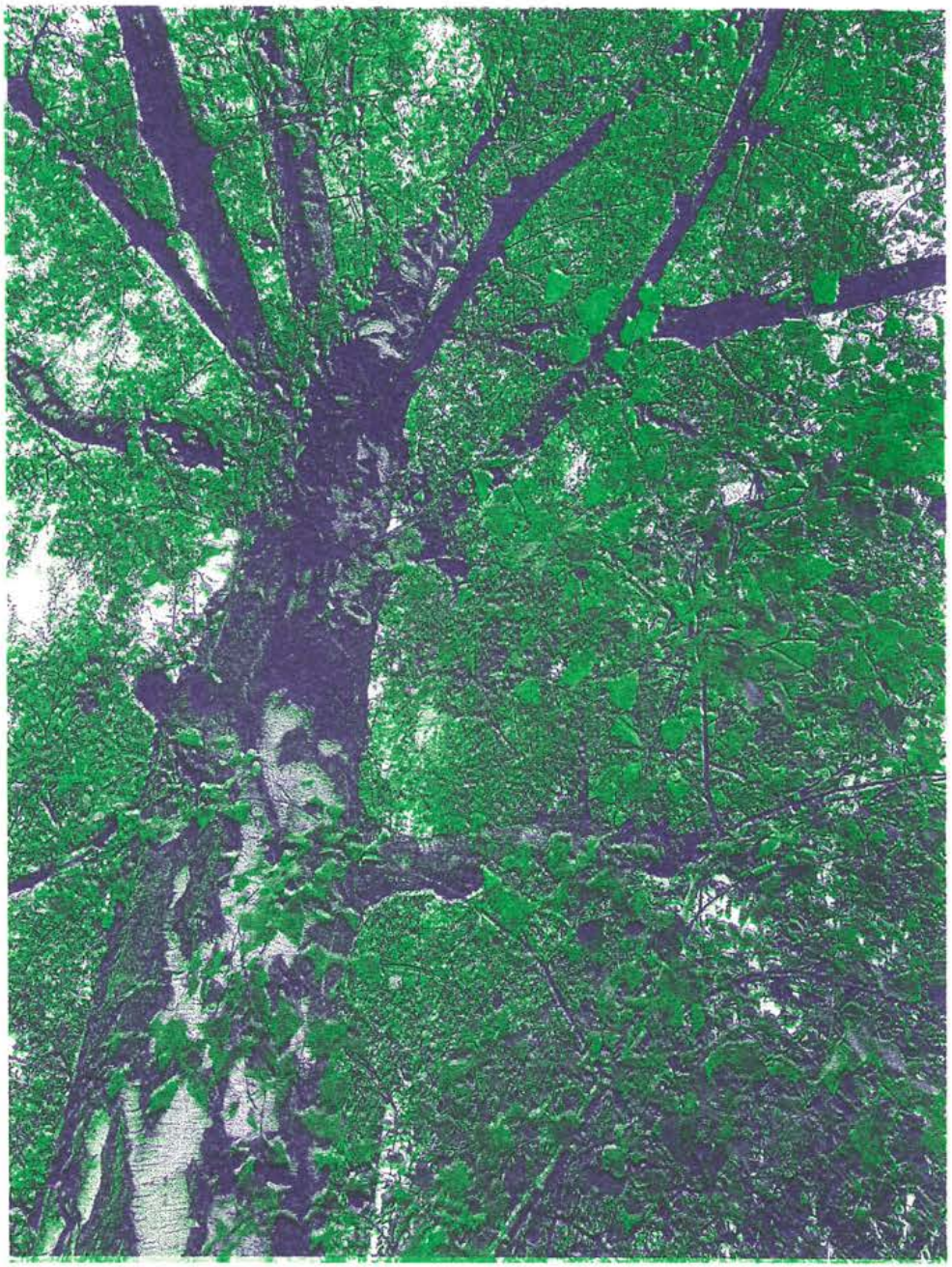
There is a birch tree in the courtyard behind the main building of the university. I ran past it several times without recognising it. At first, I saw its vine-like branches and thought it was a willow tree. Until one day, when I was sitting in a first-floor office and looking out of the window and saw the tree closely — this time with its leaves and bark — and realised it was a birch.

My grandparents live in a rural area in Ukraine, where foraging — collecting wild plants for food and medicine — is part of their everyday life. Their knowledge has been handed down through generations. I often went foraging with my mom or spent time with her in her garden. We loved harvesting plants and experimenting with their many possible uses. This experience gave me the chance to introduce the birch tree in the courtyard to others. The more I talked, the more family memories flooded back. The traditions around the birch tree are deeply rooted in my family. In general, it has always been a symbol of fertility and luck. Every year before harvest season, my grandparents would organise a large picnic around the family birch tree, to pray for a profitable harvest. The food was placed under the tree as a sacrifice. At the end of February, we would go into the woods and collect birch juice. It was a family activity that always lasted two or three days. During that time, all family members stayed at my grandparents' place. All the women would cook and bake together, while the men prepared the meat. Every year my mother — and sometimes my brother and I — would fly back to Ukraine just to take part. The birch tree was also part of many fairytales from my childhood. The witch "*Baba Yaga*" lives in a birch wood, and many poems I had to learn as a child referred to the birch. I really do miss everything the birch tree has brought to us.

However, for almost four years now, I have not been able to see my grandparents, my aunts, my uncles or my cousins, because my grandparents live directly in the war zone. The family birch tree was recently destroyed by a Russian Shahed drone, and it no longer exists.

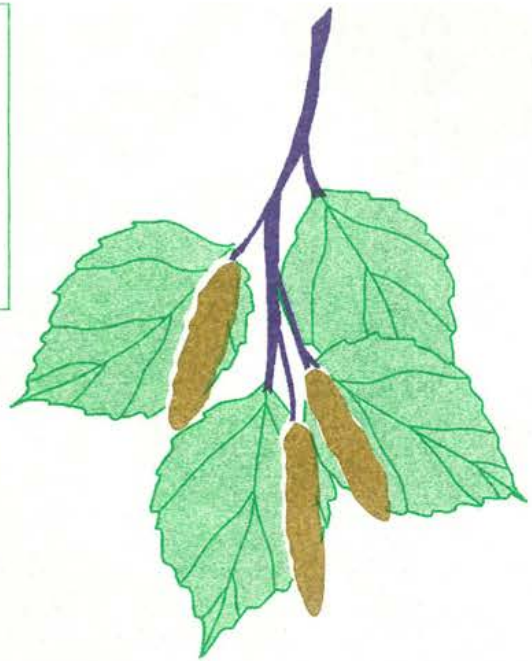


Layout of the courtyard



The birch tree I met in the courtyard

Family: *Betulaceae*
Height: 30 metres and more[4]
Phenophase: Birch juice – End of February, Flowers – March to May, Bark/Leaves/Fruits – May
Habitat: A very resilient tree that can grow in a wide range of situations,[5] but needs a lot of sunlight
Native to: Northern Hemisphere (Europe, North America, Parts of Asia)[6]
Medical Substance: *Betulin*



Leaves and catkins of birch

A tree full of wisdom and mythology

In old books, the birch tree is also called the kidney tree. The leaves, bark, and juice can be used to make a tea that helps the body flush the kidneys and relieve kidney inflammations. A substance called *Betulin* in birch bark helps against inflammations throughout the body. *Betulin* also gives the bark its white colour. Birch juice, which can be collected at the end of February, is rich in vitamin B12 and helps against tiredness and boosts metabolism. However, the collection of birch juice must follow specific rules. The same tree can only be harvested every other year. Tools used for collection should be sterilised to prevent infection of the tree. After collection, the hole in the trunk should be carefully covered. Usually, I spend two days to collect one litre of birch juice. Adding some lemon helps preserve the juice.

With the leaves you can create an antibacterial paste to treat skin rashes. Furthermore, birch bark is rich in *xylitol*, a sweet substance that can be used as an alternative to industrial sugar.[2]

Birch trees grow really fast. That's why their wood is often used to produce furniture. In addition, the wood is very flexible, and in the past it was also used to build boats. By burning the bark in a special way, a strong glue was produced to waterproof the boat, or the bark was cut into shingles to cover roofs.[3]

Here in Germany, there are different traditions surrounding the birch tree. On the first of May, a "*Maibaum*" is set up. It is a large, decorated birch tree, and it is also a symbol of a profitable harvest as well as good fortune for all the local businesses.

In Russia, the birch tree is considered "cleansing" and holy places are only cleaned with brooms made from birch branches. In many folklore stories, the birch is not only a symbol of fertility but also a tree that can protect people against witchcraft.

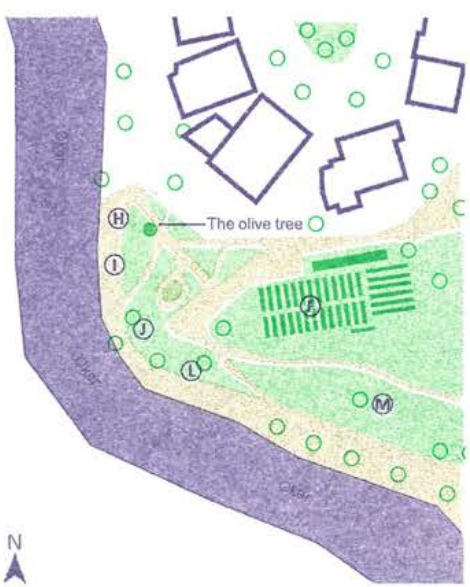
1 "Birch Broom Meaning | Goong.Com - New Generation Dictionary," accessed August 19, 2025, https://goong.com/word/birch-broom-meaning/.
2 Mannfried Pahlow, Das große Buch der Heilpflanzen: gesund durch die Heilkräfte der Natur, 9th ed. (Hamburg: Nikol Verlag, 2020).
3 "(Moor-)Birkenholz – eine Alternative?," accessed August 19, 2025, https://www.lwf.bayern.de/forsttechnik-holz/holzverwendung/342002/index.php.
4 Eidg. Forschungsanstalt WSL- WSL, "Die Hängebirke *(Betula Pendula)*," accessed July 14, 2025, https://www.waldwissen.net/de/lebensraum-wald/baeume-und-waldpflanzen/laubbaeume/die-haengebirke-betula-pendula.
5 "Betula Pendula | Silver Birch Trees/RHS," accessed August 19, 2025, http://www.rhs.org.uk/plants/2261/betula-pendula/details.
6 "Betula Pendula Roth | Plants of the World Online | Kew Science," Plants of the World Online, accessed August 19, 2025, http://powo.science.kew.org/taxon/urn:lsid:ipni.org:names:295174-1.

Healing

Kim Hennig

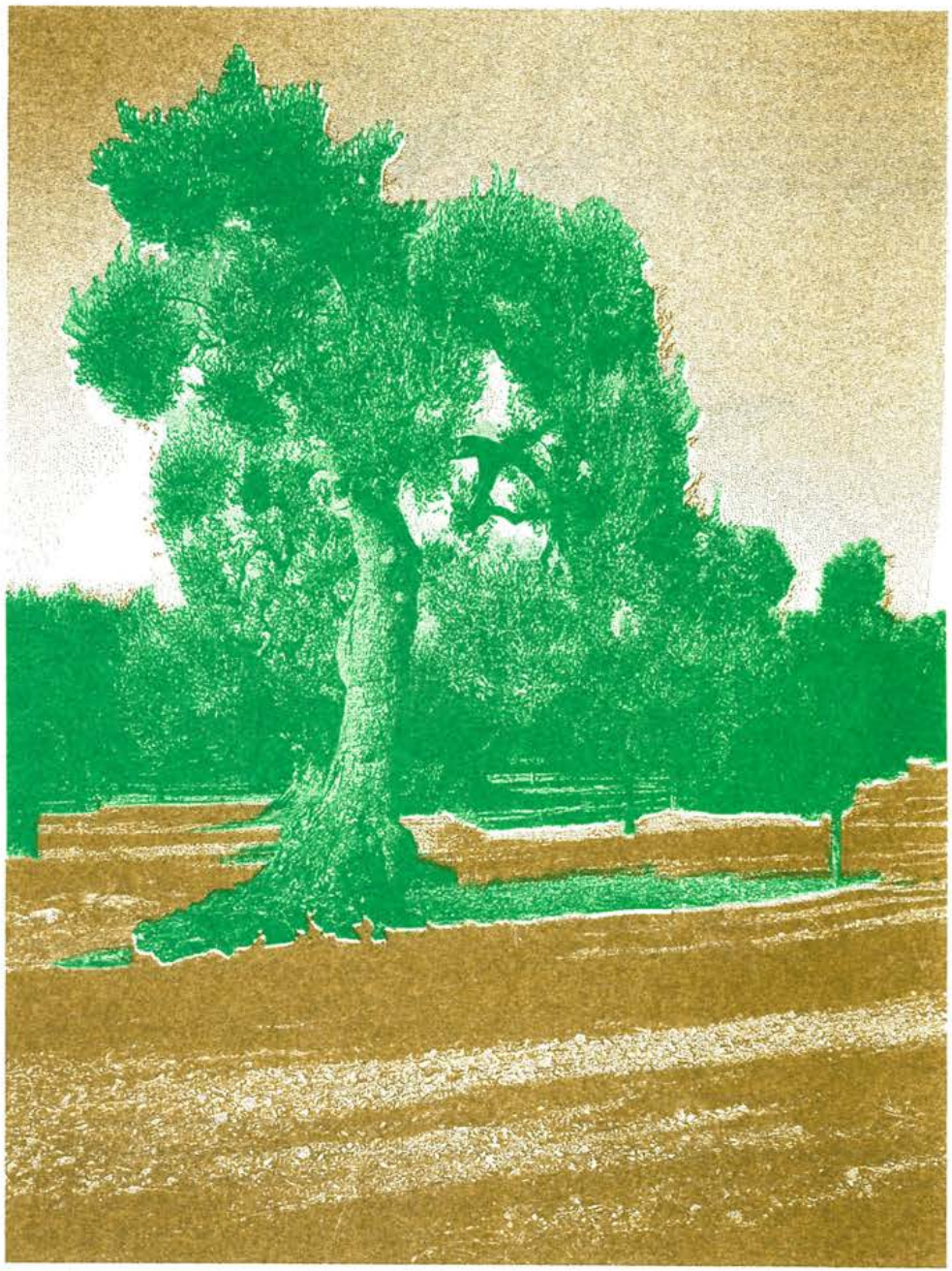
Olive tree
Olea europaea
زيتون[1], ἐλαία[2]

I found an olive tree in the botanical garden of Braunschweig, at the very end of the garden near the river Oker. It was a small olive tree, about 1.5 metres tall. I think it was part of a Mediterranean section because nearby I saw bay laurel and fennel growing. This section mainly features subtropical evergreen shrubs and hardy plants typical of the Mediterranean climate.[3] Since it was a protected garden, no one was interacting with the plants, such as picking or using them. They were just observing, taking photos, or reading the plant signs. Honestly, I don't really like olives themselves, but almost everyone around me—my family and friends—loves them. I've always been the exception. Olive oil feels different to me—it seems like a healing remedy. My mom always told me that I could use olive oil for nearly everything. As a child, I had neurodermatitis, so I often had dry and irritated skin. My mom somehow discovered that olive oil helped, and it became her treatment for dry skin. When I had sunburn, she would mix the oil with quark and apply it to the burned areas. It could even be used as a hair mask for dry hair, she told me: apply it, leave it on overnight, and wash it out the next morning. In our kitchen, we use almost exclusively olive oil. My mom always said it was one of the healthiest oils, with many benefits. The only warning she gave me was not to heat it too much, otherwise it could lose its good properties. I once asked her how she knew all these things, and she told me it was something her mother and grandmother passed on to her.



F - Systematic section
H - Subtropical sclerophyllous woods
I - Rose garden
J - Northern American flora
L - Natural wooded slope
M - Heath and mooreland flora

Layout of the Mediterranean section of Botanical garden



An olive tree can grow much taller *at home*, in Mediterranean climate

Family: *Oleaceae* (Olive family)
Height: Up to 9 metres[10]
Phenophase: Leaves/Wood – Year-round, Flowers – May to June,[11] Fruits – November to January[12]
Native to: Eastern Mediterranean, spanning across southern Europe, northern Africa, western Asia[13]

Branches, leaves, and fruits of olive tree

The olive tree I met is about one and a half metres tall

The versatile olive

The olive tree has many uses. You can eat the fruits, green or black olives, but not raw. They have to be cured in brine or lye first, which removes the bitterness.[4] Olive oil is made from the fruits and pits, usually by cold-pressing ripe olives.[5] The oil is used not only for cooking but also in cosmetics, soaps, and medicine.

The leaves can be used to make tea or extract.[6] Olive leaf extract is known for its antibacterial and anti-inflammatory properties.[7] The leaves can also be used as a natural dye for fabrics. The wood of the olive tree is very hard and is used to make kitchen utensils, furniture, and carvings.[8]

Symbolically, the olive tree plays an important role in representing peace. In the Bible, a dove returns with an olive branch after the flood; it was a sign of hope and peace. In the ancient Olympic Games, winners were crowned with an olive wreath, symbolising peaceful competition. Even today, the olive branch appears in the UN emblem, representing peace.[9]

My little wish

After studying the olive tree, I've become fascinated by it. I think it's a really beautiful tree. At first, I thought about getting one as a houseplant, but I learned that olive trees require a mild winter phase, which is difficult to provide indoors. Now that I have a balcony, I plan to buy a small olive tree to keep outside. I want to try to grow it myself and, perhaps one day, plant it in a garden of my own. That would make me happy.

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2 Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ed. Henry Stuart Jones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940).
3 Technische Universität Braunschweig, "Gartenplan," accessed August 20, 2025, https://www.tu-braunschweig.de/ifp/garten/gartenplan.
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5 "Ernte und Herstellung von Olivenöl," Oelea, accessed August 20, 2025, https://www.oelea.de/olivenoel-herstellung-und-ernte.
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9 Luzia Hartlieb, "Ältestes Friedenssymbol der Welt: Der Ölzweig und seine Ursprünge | Sonntagsblatt," accessed August 20, 2025, https://www.sonntagsblatt.de/artikel/oelzweig-olivenbaum.
10 "Olea Europaea (Common Olive)," Gardenia, n.d., accessed August 20, 2025, https://www.gardenia.net/plant/olea-europaea.
11 Beth, "Do Olive Trees Flower?," Olive Grove Oundle, July 28, 2022, https://www.olivegroveoundle.co.uk/do-olive-trees-flower/.
12 Oelea, "Ernte und Herstellung von Olivenöl."
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Stinging memory

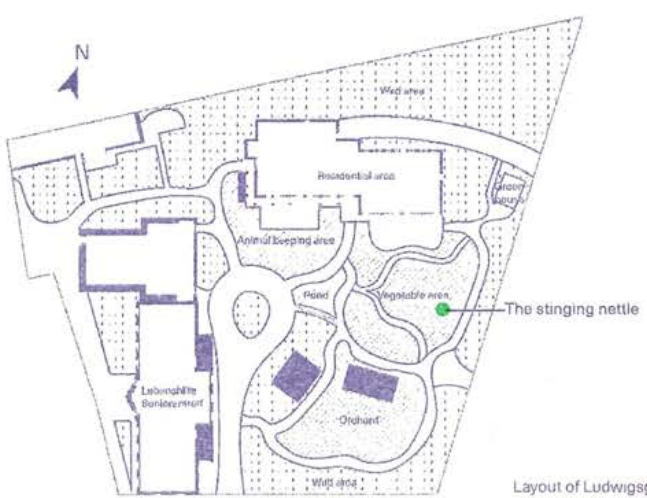
Liang Yiwen

Stinging nettle
Urtica dioica
Große Brennnessel

During my first weeks living in Clausthal, a quiet town surrounded by forests, I accidentally brushed against a plant by the roadside — completely unaware, completely unprepared. A stinging sensation quickly spread across my skin. What I thought would be just a minor discomfort ended up lasting almost an entire week. My fingers turned red, swell, itched, and even developed small blisters in some areas. I couldn't understand how a plant could cause so much pain.

This year, I visited Ludwigsgarten and reached out to the garden coordinator, Stefan Röther, who kindly arranged an interview with one of the gardeners. That's how I met Falko Feldmann, a dedicated gardener and community member. When I asked him what his favorite plant in the garden was, he didn't hesitate for a second: "Nettle."

Falko said that among all the plants they grow, nettle is the toughest, most generous, and most symbolic. As he spoke, he handed me a nettle plant and said, "If you're feeling anxious, it will sting you." The moment I touched it, that same sharp, electric pain returned. Immediately, I remembered the plant that had stung me by the roadside last year — this time, I finally knew its name — stinging nettle. But with so many plants in the garden, could the one that stings really be the most beloved?



Layout of Ludwigsgarten

The pavilion in Ludwigsgarten where neighbours share food together

The uses of stinging nettle

Falko explained that nettle is far more than just a weed. For centuries, it has been widely used throughout Europe. In Norse mythology, nettle was considered sacred to Thor, the god of thunder. People believed that burning dried nettles during storms could protect their homes from lightning strikes. Just like Thor's thunder, the sting of nettle was sharp and powerful. In some folk traditions, people even hung bundles of dried nettles above their doors to ward off evil spirits.

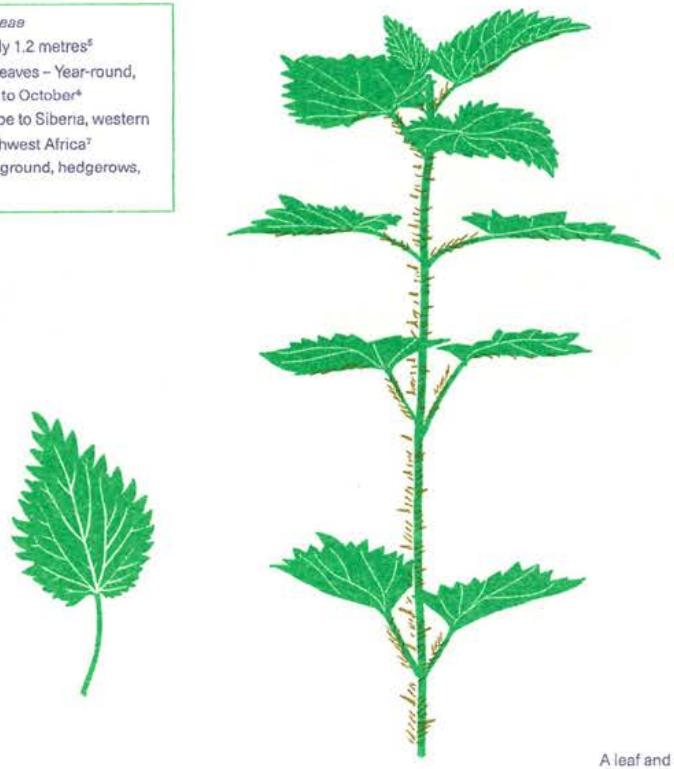
Beyond these legends, nettle also has very practical uses. Falko told me that nettle is incredibly durable; it can be processed into ropes, textiles, and fishing nets. Later, while browsing online, I was surprised to learn about Sanna, a Finnish entrepreneur who mixes nettle fibers with organic cotton to create strong, sustainable fabrics.[1]

In herbal medicine, nettle is used to reduce inflammation and improve circulation. Another gardener at Ludwigsgarten told me that he even uses fresh nettles to treat rheumatic joint pain. This traditional method is called *urtication* — using the plant's stinging hairs to stimulate blood flow and relieve chronic pain. Pain countering pain — a strange yet natural therapy.

In the garden, nettle is also used as a natural insect repellent. When soaked in water for several days, it releases compounds that drive away aphids, mites, and other pests. The gardeners eagerly showed me the buckets where they were brewing their repellent — it smelled exactly like how I imagined an organic pesticide would smell.

I thought it was such a simple and sustainable way to use one of nature's own "guardians" to protect other plants.

Family: *Urticaceae*
Height: Typically 1.2 metres[5]
Phenophase: Leaves – Year-round, Flowers – June to October[6]
Native to: Europe to Siberia, western China and northwest Africa[7]
Habitat: Waste ground, hedgerows, woods etc.[8]



A leaf and a sprig of stinging nettle

The wild area in Ludwigsgarten

Ludwigsgarten

This garden didn't always look like this. Founded in 2019 by Lebenshilfe Braunschweig, Ludwigsgarten was transformed under the careful planning and care of people like Falko and Stefan.[2] It brings together people from many different backgrounds who grow vegetables, make organic fertiliser, raise chickens that help ease anxiety, build greenhouses out of discarded windows, and organise community and research activities.[3] As stated in the mission of Lebenshilfe Braunschweigs, they offer more guidance, more education, and more support to all who need help — regardless of disability. Thanks to thoughtful design, the garden is divided into wild vegetation zones and cultivated areas, allowing insects and birds to find homes here as well.[4]

A community garden

Even with stinging hairs, nettle plays many important roles in this garden — perfectly reflecting the spirit of Ludwigsgarten. In a garden full of care, sustainability, and inclusiveness, animals, plants, and people alike can find their place. Encountering this garden has been my good fortune. Nettle is no longer just that plant by the roadside that once caused me pain. It is a memory, a myth, a medicinal herb, and a mirror of the garden's soul.

1 "About Us," Knokkon Textiles Company, n.d., accessed August 20, 2025, https://www.knokkon.com/about-us/.
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3 "Ludwigsgarten: Ludwigsgarten," accessed August 20, 2025, https://ludwigsgarten.inbraunschweig.org/.
4 Falko Feldmann and Stefan Röther, "Ludwigsgarten Ein Garten Für Alle," September 15, 2023, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://ludwigsgarten.in-braunschweig.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Documents/LUG/2023-09-15-LUG_2023.pdf.
5 "Urtica Dioica Stinging Nettle, California Nettle PFAF Plant Database," accessed August 20, 2025, https://pfaf.org/user/plant.aspx?LatinName=Urtica+dioica.
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8 "Urtica Dioica Stinging Nettle, California Nettle PFAF Plant Database."

Reconnect

Lina Marie Liebert

Ground ivy
Glechoma hederacea
Gundermann

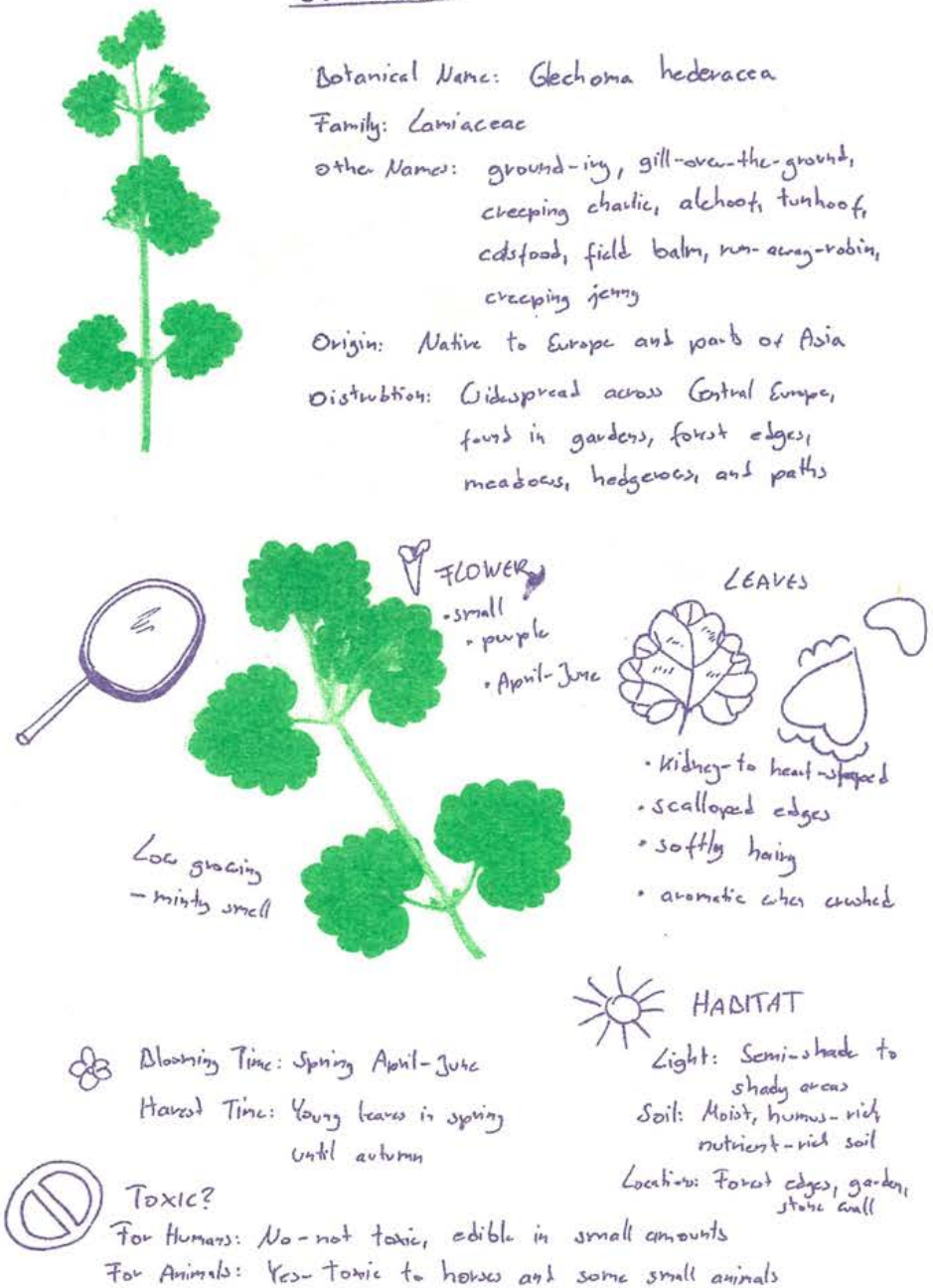
I had no knowledge of wild plants before I joined this plant-related seminar, and my life felt rather chaotic. I was exhausted from the previous semester, hardly moved my body, and felt ungrounded in my mind. Attending this seminar became a catalyst that drew me into nature. I began taking a walk every day before lunch and started exploring my surroundings. To my surprise, I discovered a community garden not far from where I live – Jugend Umwelt Park (JUP). As I spent more time outside, I began observing the plants around me and learning to recognise many new species. Gradually, my before-lunch walks became a daily habit. I started spending more time in nature.

The first plant I learned to identify was ground ivy. It often hides among the grass, and whenever I spot it, I feel a spark of joy. I love its appearance and enjoy the sweet taste of its flowers. For me, ground ivy not only encouraged me to move and connect with nature, but also makes me smile every time I see it.

Layout of Jugent Umwelt Park

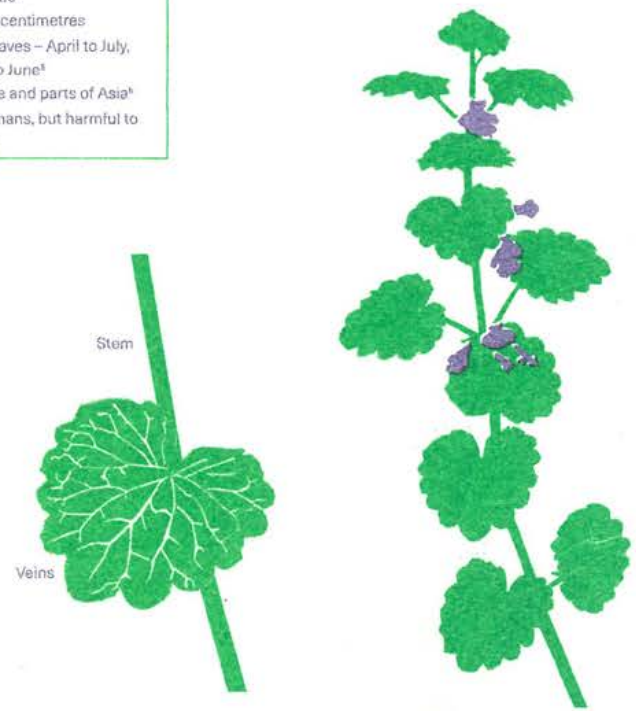
About ground ivy

Ground ivy, native to Europe and parts of Asia, thrives in semi-shaded to shaded areas. It prefers moist, nutrient-rich soil and is typically found in clayey, fertile, and damp locations such as meadows, forest edges, and the shores of lakes or ponds.[1] The plant grows 10 to 30 cm tall. Its leaves are kidney- to heart-shaped, softly hairy, and have scalloped edges. From April to June, it produces small purple flowers.[2]



Some handwritten notes on ground ivy research

Family: *Lamiaceae*
Height: 10 to 30 centimetres
Phenophase: Leaves – April to July, Flowers - April to June[1]
Native to: Europe and parts of Asia[2]
Harmless to humans, but harmful to certain animals.



A sprig of ground ivy and details of a leaf

Colour Experiment

Inspired by the seminar, I became curious if I could use ground ivy to produce plant-based ink. First, I carefully washed about a handful of ground ivy and cut it into small pieces. Then I put the chopped herbs in a pot and added just a little water, only enough to cover the bottom of the pot. I let it simmer on low heat for about 30 minutes to drain the colour from the herb and change the colour of the water. Then I poured the water into four shot glasses, added a different mordant to each one, and observed whether the colour changed. Sadly, none of them produced a clearly visible colour.

Medical Uses

Particularly noteworthy are the essential oils and bitter compounds found in the leaves and flowers of ground ivies. This combination of active ingredients gives ground ivy a wide range of healing properties: it has anti-inflammatory, antibacterial, antioxidant, expectorant, and wound-healing effects.

In herbal medicine, the leaves and aerial parts of the plant are primarily used today. As a proven home remedy, ground ivy is mainly used to relieve cold symptoms and digestive disorders, and, more rarely, to treat loss of appetite and kidney complaints.[3]

Interview

Jugend Umwelt Park has been running its permaculture project since 1993. Young people and adults have been working there and aim to introduce neighbourhood children to the world of herbs.[4] During one of my visits to the park, I met Maik, who is one of the gardeners there. I conducted an interview with him on 29.05.2025. The conversation is reproduced verbatim.

Lina: How long have you been interested in wild herbs?
Maik: Actually, since my youth. I first started getting into permaculture, and then in 2003, in this garden, I began focusing on herbs through the association.

Lina: Do you have a favourite herb? And why?
Maik: My favourite herb is tree spinach. It simply looks beautiful and is easy to propagate. You can steam it like spinach or eat it raw in salads. I do that often.

Lina: How did you personally become aware of ground ivy (Gundermann)?
Maik: Ground ivy was already growing at my parents' house. That's where I first saw it.

Lina: Why is this particular herb growing here in the youth garden?
Maik: We try to grow a wide variety of herbs here. Ground ivy has been around since the very beginning, even before I started working here.

Lina: How do you prefer to use ground ivy?
Maik: I think I've only eaten it in salads so far.

Lina: Are there plants that are easily confused with others?
Maik: Yes, there are a few that look quite similar. For example, wild garlic and lily of the valley, or hemlock and chervil. But only if you're not familiar with them. Once you've held a plant a few times, you can just tell what it is.

Lina: Do you think people today still know enough about local wild herbs?
Maik: I think people used to be more knowledgeable about them. Today, many just buy their vegetables from the supermarket and only know the standard varieties. I believe it would be helpful if more people engaged with this topic. Many don't even know that you can eat dandelions or daisies, for example. Learning more about your own environment isn't a bad thing—especially in times of climate change. If the climate changes significantly, certain herbs may stop growing because the conditions become too dry. In general, it's not a bad idea to learn more about them. Nutritionally, many herbs are healthier than store-bought salad. For example, many herbs have more vitamin C.

Lina: What can a youth garden contribute to preserving or passing on this knowledge?
Maik: A lot. For one, the garden can introduce the topic to people who know nothing about it. You gain a deeper connection to plants, the environment, and your food. Food doesn't just appear at the supermarket, it has to be sown, watered, harvested, prepared, and eaten.

Lina: Is there a story or experience from the garden that particularly stuck with you?
Maik: Yes, once a child from the neighbourhood came in and only knew soft drinks from home. The child was amazed that you could make something as tasty as apple juice from apples, which also looked strange to them. That really surprised me. But I think that is going to happen more often in the future.

Lina: What advice would you give someone who wants to start learning about wild herbs?
Maik: They're welcome to come by, and I can show them some things. Wild herb tours are also very interesting. Since we practice permaculture here, we grow a lot of different things. Just go outside, get a plant guide, and start exploring.

MEDICAL USES

Active Compounds:
Essential oils, tannins, bitters, saponins

Uses: Helps with coughs, colds, bronchitis

Digestive aid: Stimulates appetite, relives bloating

Wound treatment: Antibacterial and anti-inflammatory, used externally for wounds or skin condition

Detox support: Support liver and kidney function (traditionally used to help remove heavy metals)

RECIPES WITH GUNDERMANN

Herb Butter[7]

- 125g butter
- 1 tbsp finely chopped Gundermann leaves
- 1 tsp lemon juice
- salt & pepper

↳ let butter soften → mix it → shape and chill
♡ great on bread or grilled food

Tea[8]

- 1-2 tsp of fresh or dried leaves
- 250 ml hot water over the leaves

↳ let steep for 10 min
♡ good for coughs, colds, digestive discomfort

Salad

Mix Gundermann leaves with other edible wild herbs like daisy, dandelion, sorrel, and top with a light dressing of oil, vinegar, and a little honey.

Some handwritten notes on ground ivy research

My failed color experiment

1 "Glechoma Hederacea | Ground Ivy Herbaceous Perennial/RHS," accessed August 20, 2025, http://www.rhs.org.uk/plants/8034/glechoma-hederacea/details.

2 Wikipedia, "Gundermann," June 2, 2025, https://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Gundermann&oldid=256602909; Steffen Guido Fleischhauer, Jürgen Guthmann, and Roland Spiegelberger, Essbare Wildpflanzen: 200 Arten Bestimmen Und Verwenden (Baden: AT Verlag, 2015).

3 "Gundermann - (Glechoma hederacea)," kraeuter-buch.de, accessed August 20, 2025, https://www.kraeuter-buch.de/kraeuter/Gundermann.html.

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7 "Wildkräuterbutter von Barbabietola," Chefkoch, accessed August 20, 2025, https://www.chefkoch.de/rezepte/3856651587277053/Wildkraeuterbutter.html.

8 Franziska Knecht, "Gundermanntee gegen Erkältung, Frühjahrsmüdigkeit und mehr," Kostbare Natur, June 13, 2018, https://www.kostbarenatur.net/gundermann-tee-zubereiten-wirkung/.

Bodhranaruknica

Denis Muratovic

Common nettle, burning nettle, stinging nettle
Urtica dioica
Große Brennnessel

Bodhranaruknica is a compound word I coined in the spirit of South Slavic word-formation, full of cultural, emotional, and symbolic meanings.

Bod = sting — refers to stinging nettles, their protective bite, and the initial discomfort often associated with this plant, both literally and metaphorically.
Hrana = food — nourishment, tradition, and maternal care. It represents the way the nettle was transformed into something delicious and essential, like pita.
Ruka = hand — symbolises the loving labour of a mother's hands: making food, gathering nettles, stretching dough, and carrying the family through hardship.
-nica = a common Slavic feminine suffix — implies a being, a presence, or a place tied to nurturing, memory, and resilience.

Bodhranaruknica = a culinary memory mixed with complex emotions and love. It encapsulates a mother's strength and tenderness — the sting of shame, the warmth of food, and the tireless hands that give everything. A tribute to her quiet resilience, to the pain turned into nourishment, and to the culture passed on through care.

Place a stinging nettle on a piece of white cloth and hammer it until the plant's fibers and juices are embedded in the weave of the fabric.

I have known the taste of stinging nettles since I was a chubby kid, thanks to my mom. I loved the food she made, especially pita, even though I didn't know the filling was called stinging nettles.

Pita is a traditional dish in Greece, Turkey, and the Balkans. It comes with different fillings such as potatoes, meat, cheese, pumpkin, and stinging nettle leaves. Making pita was a labour-intensive, hands-on process. My mom had to make the dough and gather the ingredients all by herself. She stretched the dough so thin that our oven could easily burn some parts of the pita. The filling was always more generous than what people could buy anywhere else, making the pita juicier and more luscious on the inside. I loved the smell of pita as well. The aroma shifted depending on the filling, sometimes earthy and even slightly sweet. My mom always filled the pita with stinging nettles. The smell of her pita was warm and yeasty, much like other fresh breads. When milk was poured over the pita, the scent became even more comforting.

Once, my aunt, who comes from a different cultural background, visited us with her husband and three kids. We went out together to collect stinging nettles for baking pita. At that age, I couldn't understand some of her behaviour, but it left me with a strange impression. She was visibly confused when picking the leaves, and when she saw little insects washing out, she recoiled in disgust. My mom spent nearly two hours making pita, from stretching the dough to using the best ingredients she could find. But my aunt's reaction was so strong that all her kids noticed and refused to eat the pita. The next day, I ate a full plate of the leftover pita, since there was still plenty left. My mom looked at me happily without saying a word.

As I was growing up, my mom still picked nettles and always asked if I wanted to join her. We lived near a busy street where everyone knew us. When picking nettles, my mom hunched by the roadside with a plastic bag, her hands wrapped in kitchen gloves. It seemed so out of place in a "civilised" setting. I could feel the pedestrians' eyes on us and started to feel embarrassed. I hated how peculiar we were. Everyone else walked past us and headed to clean supermarkets where vegetables were wrapped. Why couldn't we do the same?

The thought of people's strange looks made me reluctant, and I refused to join her. Either I went out to play or stayed in my room pretending to be busy until she returned, so that I didn't have to carry anything that embarrassed me.

Even when I did go with her, I kept complaining the entire time, making the whole trip miserable. But she never got angry. She just kept gathering what she could and turned those leaves into meals we otherwise couldn't have afforded.

Back then, I didn't understand what it meant for a woman to leave her country at the young age of nineteen, starting a new life in a place with a language she had never spoken before, without knowing how to earn money, going through a divorce, and raising two boys as a single mother. Because of the situation, we had to restart our life from scratch. We were never fortunate enough to have much. I used to get a lot of hand-me-down clothes, not only from my brother but also from our cousins and neighbours. My mother found every possible way to save money. It seemed like every coin could disappear immediately. But she never spared her energy or her love in taking care of us. Now, looking back on everything about nettles, I feel a deep sense of regret. Strange looks from others shouldn't be the reason to abandon our own culture and adapt to the mainstream. I was wrong to assume my mom's behaviour was vulgar. I should recognise that the shame I felt is something deeply and silently rooted in social conventions. This is what we call "the fear of being different."

I owe my mom so much, and I could never really repay her. I think about her hands and arms, the reddish blisters from the nettles, and what she gave us — those simple, handmade meals that were more than survival. They were a kind of resilience disguised as dinner, a kind of love that never announced itself but filled every plate, a symbolic gesture of unconditional care. She always sacrificed so much for us without asking for anything in return. She just tried her best to feed us. Her strength has become my inspiration.

I wish I could go back. I wish I could pick the leaves by her side without flinching. I wish I could say thank you, not with words, but with time. Because now I know that everything she made for us — especially the things I once wanted to forget — is love in its purest, most unspoken form.

A handmade pita filled with stinging nettles

After air-drying naturally, brush away the dried plant fibers with a soft brush, and get a plant-pressed handkerchief.

Pita recipe with stinging nettle filling

Ingredients:

Dough: 3 cups flour, 1 cup warm water, 2 tsp yeast, 1 tsp salt, 2 tbsp olive oil, pinch of sugar
Filling: 2 cups young stinging nettle leaves, 1 chopped onion, 2 tbsp olive oil, salt & pepper, feta cheese (optional)

Instructions:

Make dough: Mix yeast, (sugar), and warm water; wait for 5–10 mins. Combine flour and salt; add yeast mixture and olive oil. Knead for 8–10 mins. Allow dow to rise 1 hour, until doubled.
Prepare filling: Rinse nettles, blanch for 1–2 mins, drain, and chop. Sauté onion in olive oil until soft, add nettles, cook 3–4 mins, season, and stir in feta. Let cool.
Assemble pita: Preheat oven to 425°F (220°C). Divide dough into 6 balls or one large piece, roll each out thin. Place filling on half, fold, and seal edges. Bake for 8–12 mins, until golden.
Serve warm, with milk or yogurt if desired.

Other fillings you can try:

Meat Filling: minced meat with spices
Cheese Filling: cottage cheese or feta with herbs
Vegetable Filling: spinach, chard, potatoes, or stinging nettles

From sour to sweet

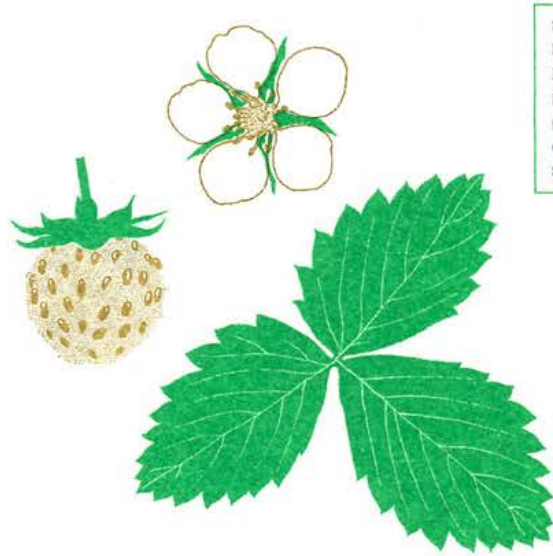
Styliani Papaioannou

Wild trawberry
Fragaria vesca
Erdbeere

I saw some wild strawberries at the Schul- und Forschungsgarten on the North Campus of TU Braunschweig. Although they are called "wild", wild strawberries are still cultivated for domestic use because of their strong flavour.[1] This type of strawberry is *Fragaria vesca*, which is different from the bigger, juicier, and sweeter ones found in supermarkets — *Fragaria* × *ananassa*.

When I was a kid, I didn't like the taste of strawberries at all. My grandmother used to grow strawberries in our garden. She was only an amateur gardener and refused to use any fertiliser. As a result, the strawberries she grew were very bitter and sour. I thought that was what strawberries tasted like and came to dislike them. Many years later, I happened to try some store-bought strawberries and couldn't help loving their juicy and sweet taste. Now strawberries are one of my favorite fruits, and I enjoy them every summer in Greece.

Flowers and fruits of wild strawberry in different dates



Family: *Rosaceae*
Height: 0.1–0.5 metres
Phenophase: Flowers - May to November, Seeds - June to November
Native to: North America to Guatemala, Macaronesia, Europe to Siberia and Xinjiang[2]

Leaf, flower, and fruit of wild strawberry

School and Research Garden

As a fixed component of the course *Biology and its Teaching* at TU Braunschweig, the Schul- und Forschungsgarten (School and Research Garden) aims to impart both theoretical and practical gardening knowledge.[2] A large variety of trees, shrubs, vegetables, herbs, and other vibrant plant species grow there.

The garden is divided into several parts: a greenhouse, an herb square, two raised beds, and a fountain-shaped wooden structure. A small, beautiful pond beside the greenhouse forms its own little ecosystem with frogs and aquatic plants. A strip of stony hill, covered with many different plants, is connected to the pond as an experimental filtering system. Beneath a large linden tree, there are wooden benches made of tree trunks where students can sit, relax, or have classes surrounded by nature. The whole garden is thoughtfully designed, with great potential to host many outdoor learning activities.

Unfortunately, much of this potential remains untapped. Many areas lack maintenance, or their actual use deviates from the original purposes. For example, the fountain-shaped wooden structure was designed as a "strawberry pyramid" but somehow herbs are growing in it, whereas the strawberries I found had been planted where potatoes were supposed to grow.

Visiting this garden is definitely worthwhile, and more places like it should exist on university campuses, because such spaces can raise students' awareness of environmental issues and offer them meaningful, hands-on experiences. However, more manpower, support, and proper maintenance are necessary as well.

1 Wikipedia, "*Fragaria vesca*," August 17, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Fragaria_vesca&oldid=1306384086.

2 Technische Universität Braunschweig, "School & Research Garden," accessed August 21, 2025, https://www.tu-braunschweig.de/en/ifdn/biologie/translate-to-english-schul-forschungsgarten.

3 "Fragaria Vesca L. | Plants of the World Online | Kew Science," Plants of the World Online, accessed August 21, 2025, http://powo.science.kew.org/taxon/urn:lsid:ipni.org:names:30074127-2.

Evocative

Josephine Weigand

Ostrich fern
Matteuccia struthiopteris
Straußenfarn

I was born in Braunschweig and went to elementary school there. Back in fourth grade, we took part in a drawing competition held at the Botanical Garden in Braunschweig. We were allowed to walk around and choose a plant to draw. I chose the Ostrich Fern because the shape of its leaves makes it look so delicate and light. It also has a beautiful, vibrant green colour. The best part was that I won the competition with my drawing. Every time I visit the Botanical Garden, I think of this story.

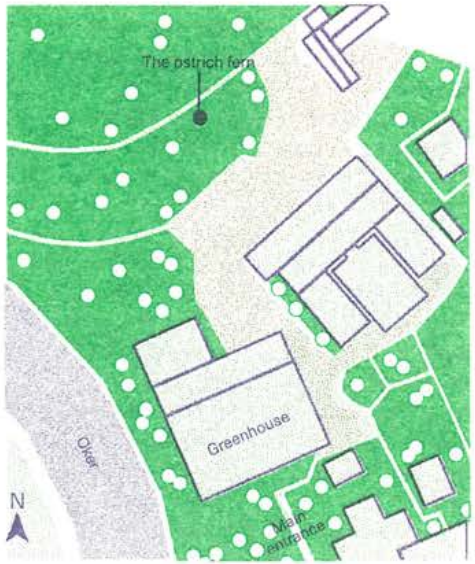
To this day, I still find ferns very beautiful to look at. I especially like their large fronds and the shape of the leaves. I also think they make the surroundings beautifully green.

About the fern I met

To see the ostrich fern in the Botanical Garden, enter through the main entrance on Humboldtstraße, walk past the display greenhouses, and then turn right toward the waterfall with the small stream. There you will find it growing in its natural habitat.

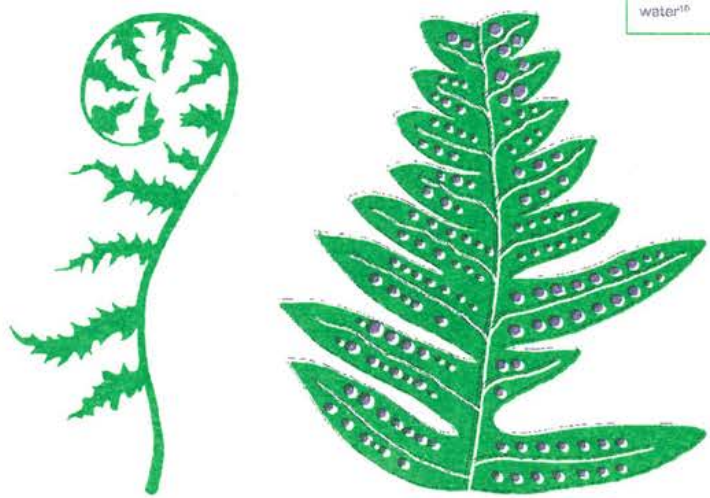
The ostrich fern is considered endangered in Germany, so it should not be touched or removed from its natural habitat.[1] It thrives in moist environments and can grow up to 1.70 metres tall.[2]

Although the ostrich fern is edible, only the young, still coiled shoots known as "fiddleheads" can be consumed. These can be harvested only in spring. However, caution is required: when raw, they are toxic and must be thoroughly cooked before eating.[3] Please, never eat it raw! When properly prepared, they develop a nutty flavour[4] and taste very nice with butter.[5]



Layout of the fern section at Botanischergarten

Family: *Onocleaceae*
Height: Up to 1.70 metres[8]
Sprout season: April to August
Native to: Temp. Eurasia[9]
Habitat: Marshy, boggy areas near water[10]



Fiddlehead and leafback of ostrich fern

About other ferns

There are around 12,000 different species of ferns on Earth, 171 of which are found in Europe. Ferns are among the oldest plant groups in the world, dating back approximately 400 million years. Thanks to their diverse growth forms, ferns occur in a wide range of habitats worldwide — most commonly in moist and shady places, but also in gorges. They are especially abundant in Central and South America.[6] When I think of ferns, I usually picture a plant growing close to the ground, but there are also tree ferns. The fronds of tree ferns can grow to more than one meter in length, and the trees themselves are typically found in tropical regions of the world.[7]

1 "Deutscher Straußenfarn - gestalte deinen Garten ökologisch & pflegeleicht," accessed August 22, 2025, https://www.naturadb.de/pflanzen/matteuccia-struthiopteris/.
2 Matthias Borner, "Straußenfarn im Botanischen Garten Gütersloh | Stadtpark Gütersloh," Stadtpark Gütersloh | Botanischer Garten Gütersloh | Der Förderkreis, August 3, 2017, https://stadtpark-guetersloh.de/straussenfarn-straussfarn/.
3 "Farnspitzen (Fiedelköpfe) zubereiten," wikiHow, accessed August 22, 2025, https://de.wikihow.com/Farnspitzen-(Fiedelk%C3%B6pfe)-zubereiten.
4 miro.bastians@gmail.com, Farnspitzen essen – Permalithicum, August 1, 2024, https://permalithicum.com/farnspitzen-essen/.
5 wikiHow, "Farnspitzen (Fiedelköpfe) zubereiten."
6 Wikipedia, "Farne," May 23, 2025, https://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Farne&oldid=256248567.
7 Wikipedia, "Baumfarne," July 9, 2024, https://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Baumfarne&oldid=246802751.
8 Borner, "Straußenfarn im Botanischen Garten Gütersloh | Stadtpark Gütersloh."
9 "Onoclea Struthiopteris (L.) Roth | Plants of the World Online | Kew Science," Plants of the World Online, accessed August 22, 2025, http://powo.science.kew.org/taxon/urn:lsid:ipni.org:names:17275510-1.
10 Borner, "Straußenfarn im Botanischen Garten Gütersloh | Stadtpark Gütersloh."

Solace

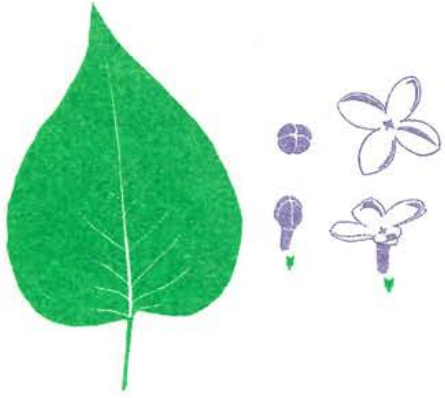
Yue Sun

Lilac
Syringa oblata
紫丁香

I like to share this story when people ask me about my favourite plant in Braunschweig. My answer is lilac. The story took place in April 2024, shortly after I had moved to Braunschweig. Because of the rainy and cloudy weather, my dilapidated accommodation, and the stress of adjusting to a new environment, I felt a little depressed. One morning on my way to work, I caught sight of a flowering bush with which I was quite familiar, but its colour was much more vivid than I remembered. I walked closer to take a better look and immediately recognised that it was lilac, as the shape of the flowers, buds, and leaves were exactly the same as those that grow everywhere in my hometown, Harbin.

Harbin is located in Northeast China. Its high latitude gives it a half-year-long, harsh winter, with temperatures that can reach -30 degrees and make the arrival of the short and late spring more precious. Lilacs bloom in May, like harbingers of spring, decorating the grey city with shades of green and light purple, and filling the air with a pleasant fragrance. I still remember that before I started school, I had to spend the whole day alone at home. It was such a pleasure when my mom returned with a bouquet of lilacs she picked in the courtyard of her workplace. She would put them tenderly in a recycled peach jar filled with clean water. For the next couple of days, those little purple flowers kept me company.

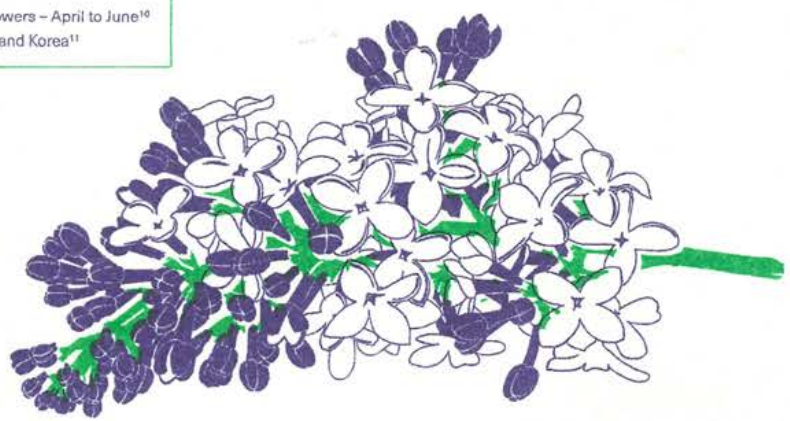
Compared with other plants, lilac is quite modest. After fulfilling its role as a harbinger of spring, it stays green for the rest of the year. During the blooming season, purple buds slowly unfold into pale blossoms. The ones I encountered in Braunschweig, though shaded in deeper hues of burgundy or a purer white and carrying less fragrance, still brought me comfort and a familiar sense of home.



Flowers, buds, and leaves of lilac

The lilac bush I met on my way to work

Family: *Oleaceae*
Height: Shrubs or small trees to 5metres[9]
Phenophase: Flowers – April to June[10]
Native to: China and Korea[11]



Purple buds of lilacs will unfold into pale blossoms

The official flower of Harbin

Although lilac grows on almost every street in Harbin, it is not easy for plants to survive the harsh winter weather. The city must carefully choose plant varieties suitable for urban cultivation. Because of lilac's tolerance, in April 1988, lilac became the official flower of Harbin.[1] The characteristics of lilac also mirror the image of Harbin's winter: covered with white snow, dry, yet full of sunshine.

Paschalia and 紫丁香

Lilacs have many different varieties. The lilacs I encountered in Braunschweig are *Syringa vulgaris* — which is native to Bulgaria, Greece, the northwestern Balkan Peninsula, and Romania, and later spread across Europe.[2] While I was introducing lilac during a foraging walk, Christina told me that in Greek, lilac is called *Paschalia* (Πασχαλιά). Pascha itself means "Easter," so the name refers to the flowering season of lilacs and literally means "to bloom at Easter." This species is similar to the lilacs that grow in Harbin — *Syringa oblata*, which is native to China[3] and is called "紫丁香", a name that describes its purple colour, clove-shaped flowers, and soft aroma.

Flavor and medicine

My interest in foraging inspired me to explore how I could use lilac. Here are two recipes for making lilac-flavoured sugar and honey:

Lilac sugar recipe: Harvest the lilacs first thing in the morning while the temperatures are cooler and the blossoms are at peak moisture content. Remove the lilac flowers from their stems and layer them with granulated sugar in a jar. Let the aroma of the flowers infuse the sugar for a week. Then the lilac sugar is ready to use.[4]

Lilac honey recipe: Fill a jar with lilac flowers, then pour raw honey into the jar until the flowers are completely covered. Flip the jar over from time to time, or gently stir the flowers, and let the aroma infuse the honey for at least a few days and up to several weeks before using.[5]

Beyond providing me with personal spiritual solace, lilacs have also been used as traditional medicine to treat depression. It is the primary ingredient in a traditional Tibetan medicine known as AKARU sinensis.[6] The stem has been used as a sedative for nearly a hundred years to treat headaches, forgetfulness, insomnia, irritability, and other symptoms.[7] It is also used in traditional Mongolian medicine, where it is clinically applied to treat cardiac pain.[8]

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