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47. Readers Digest, Field Guide, p.81.

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COUNTRY PEOPLE IN NORWAY AND THEIR KNOWLEDGE OF PLANTS

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If you make notes of vernacular plant names and other plant-lore for 60 or 65 years, you will learn at least one thing: the language of the professional botanist differs in many ways from that of the non-botanist. Not only are different names used for plants and plant organs, but concepts are often totally different.

Taking a zoological example, a certain species of seal is often called by one name, A, when new-born, by another name, B, after a month or two, and by a third name when it is a year old. To ask if A is the same as B would make you sound ridiculous, for the word species does not exist, and has no equivalent, in the language of the seal hunter, sailor or fisherman.

The fruit of the cloudberry is called multe when mature, but only then. You may ask one of the local people in a Norwegian valley 'Did you find any multe?' and get the answer 'No, there were only kart' - kart is unripe fruit of any sort.

Wavy Hair-grass is one of the commonest grasses in Norway. It has almost thread-like leaves in

very loose tufts, and has a certain faculty for vegetative propagation by means of short underground shoots. In Norway there are other species of grass with equally narrow leaves, but those of the Wavy Hair-grass are the only ones which remain soft throughout the summer grazing season.

Cattle are very fond of grazing on this grass. I once said to a group of students that it is known to every cow and milkmaid in Norway. One of the students, a country lad, found my remark offensive. In fact, I meant just the opposite - it expressed my respect for the cattle's instinct and the accummulated knowledge of the country people.

Vernacular names for Wavy Hair-grass vary from one district to another: smyle (including such variations as smil, smelve, sveime, etc.), tov, rusk, rysk, etc. The plant has flower stalks which are about half a metre high and terminate in the flowers on the thin wavy stems which give the plant its English name. These stalks are of little interest to either cow or farmer. Hence the names listed above apply only to the basal leaves. If for some reason (for example in answer to a foolish question from a botanist), a name for the flower stalks should be needed, the name used would be one of those applied to the stalks of any of at least a dozen other grass species which produce inflorescences of more or less similar height and shape. The most common of these names are bunke, bunk, döglabb, dagrabb, faks, froeng, jaegel,

ragestrå, revstreng and repstreng. Thus if a botanist showed a countryman a flower stalk of a grass and asked 'What do you call this?', he might enter in his note-book 'Here the common name of Calamagrostis arundinacea is dagrabb' (or whatever answer he had been given). Whilst this is correct, it is also wrong, because the name given to him would also be used for many other species of grass. The farmer would see no reason for having different names for the flower stalks of these species, for he had no use for them whatsoever.

As I have already said, there are other species of grass with leaves which grow in more or less dense tufts, these include Mat-grass and Sheep's Fescue. As long as they are young they are soft and succulent, and are well liked by cattle, but they lose these good qualities earlier than Wavy Hair-grass, and Mat-grass becomes particularly stiff and hard. In a district where Wavy Hair-grass is absent or rare, and only in such districts, the name smyle may be transferred to another narrow-leaves grass, or even to some completely different plant - such as Least Willow - which is low-growing and liked by grazing animals.

The botanist may be a bit supercilious when he learns that a layman lumps together many species under a common name. However, if there is a need for it, the countryman may very well be able to recognise and separate related species, even at a quick glance.

In Norway there are several species of clubmoss, including two species which are almost equally common. The stems can be several metres long, and are covered with small needle-like leaves; in one species the leaves end in a small hair-like point. One of these species has been bundled up, tied in a certain way, and used for scrubbing pots and pans. This practice continued in some country districts until quite recently, and during World War II, bundles were sold in small country shops. Those who made, or used, these bundles were, however, very particular about the species of clubmoss used: only the Interrupted Clubmoss was used, the other one, Stag's-horn Clubmoss, being too soft and not sufficiently durable. Out in the field a farmer or his wife could instantly recognise the useful species, even from a distance, but would probably be unable to consciously define how it differed from the other species.

However, in exceptional cases country people have noticed very minor differences between species. In the northern half of Norway people used fern rhizomes as an additional fodder for their cattle. Other plants so used if there was an insufficient hay harvest from the uncultivated fields and moorland included reindeer moss (which a botanist would not call a moss but a lichen), bundles of birch twigs, aspen and other tree leaves, and the bark of rowan, aspen and some other trees.

Fern rhizomes were nourishing, and cattle (if

they were hungry enough - as they usually were) had no objections to them, but it was hard work digging up the 'roots', and there was an additional problem: the rhizomes of one species, the lady fern, were said to be poisonous to cattle. It is not always easy to distinguish between this species and other ferns even in summer when the fronds are fully grown. It is even more difficult in winter when the fronds have withered and fallen to the ground, but country people have discovered a character which separates lady fern from other species. On lady fern and similar species the base of each stalk (about 5-8 cms in length) remains attached to the rhizome after the fronds have withered, and if one feels with one's fingers along the two opposite edges of the stalk one finds that the lady fern, unlike all other species, has a series of small nodules on either side.

Jens Holmboe, writing about this in 1925, found that in those parts of Norway where fern rhizomes were still used as fodder the farmers were all familiar with this character, although they did not depend on it for the identification of rhizomes. They were able to instantly recognise lady fern, but they were also able to mention the character and demonstrate it.

It is only very rarely that one can find a parallel to such knowledge of a single, minor character. What usually happens when a non-botanist recognises a plant is that at first glance he takes in the whole

plant and immediately says either: 'This is so and so', or 'I don't know it' - just as he does when he sees a person approaching. One does not normally say (or think): 'That man is tall and hefty, he has red hair, and a big nose - he is my brother.'

Of course, very often a botanist is so familiar with a plant that he identifies it instantly. If he cannot, he will proceed in an analytical way: 'A herbaceous dicotyledon with opposite pinnate leaves, flower epigynous ....', and so on through an extensive Greek vocabulary until he safely arrives at whatever species it is.

The non-botanist finds it difficult to describe a plant; he lacks the terminology, or uses words for other meanings than the botanist. Seeds, for example, are anything which can be sown to produce new plants, including frøpoteter - 'seed-potatoes'. Fruits are something juicy, certainly not hazel nuts or the small, hard, dry objects you buy in a little bag with the name and picture of 'parsley' on it. A root is practically any subterranean part of a plant, as it was to Dioscorides and other learned men two thousand years ago. In many parts of Norway plants grown on window sills are called 'trees', and often so are shrubs of redcurrant and similar plants growing in the garden. Stems and stalks are defined differently by laymen and botanists.

The Norwegian urt, which has the same root as the English wort, has an old fashioned sound, and

is practically never used in everyday speech. When it is it means a medicinal herb, but in botanical books it is the only word for herbaceous, i.e. non-woody, plants.

A farmer may be able to tell whether the young green in a field some distance away is wheat, barley or oats, but he probably lacks the words to describe it so that a botanist could recognise it. Such helplessness with regard to unfamiliar professions and their termini technici is something we all have to face now and then. I am sure most of us would not be able to describe a ballet or a shoemaker's work in such a way that it made sense to a professional.

Thus it is clear that one cannot easily estimate the number of plant species which have dialect names in a given district or herred.

My interests have concentrated primarily on plant names, and then on other material. Since the mid-1920's I have questioned country people, and have sought further information from lexigraphic and ethnographic archives, mostly covering the same period. In the collections there is great variation from district to district in the number of species which have names in the local dialect. The main reason for this lies in the varying number and ability of local informants. There are neighbouring districts one of which is almost a blank spot on the map, while the other has fostered a daughter or son of a truly scientific mind. Such amateurs have usually had

little formal education, and often their economic situation and social status have been modest, but to scientists studying natural history, dialect or folklore, such people have often proved invaluable personal friends.

The districts ranking highest have local names for upwards of 150 species of wild plants. One might expect the districts where most local names have been found would be those which are remote from urbanised areas. However, this is not necessarily so. In districts bordering on towns (even on farms within the administrative borders of Oslo) it has been possible to reap a surprisingly rich harvest.

Now, however, the change and (from our point of view) deterioration is rapid. No longer does a farmer, on the birth of his first son, go out into the forest and mark the trees to be spared until the son needs them for his house. Few people remember that excellent ropes have been produced from the inner bark of lime trees, or that withies (vidje) were made in hundreds from shoots growing from birch tree stumps. Today a tree is a tree. Which kind? That doesn't matter. It did in grandfather's time when three different species of trees were needed to make a good rake. Wild plants, from lichens and seaweed to parts of trees, provided invaluable fodder. Wild and garden plants were used to cure illness. Children learned from older children, or their grandmothers, how to play with flowers, bits of straw, fir cones, nuts

and leaves, and nursery rhymes passed from generation to generation, even if there were no nurseries.

We all know how and why this has changed.

The old traditional knowledge is no longer needed, and in the course of a few generations it will be lost or, at best, remain fossilised in museum collections and archives.