

# Our Heritage of Common Plants

## Barracks Lane Community Garden

The Heritage of Common Plants project was initiated by Barracks Lane Community Garden in 2016 and funded by Heritage Lottery. Our heritage can be discovered, explored and shared through some of the common plants found in our gardens and hedgerows.

**This series of six posters documents this unique project.**

Oxford is famous internationally as a 'City of Learning.' This project engaged local people many of whom have never accessed the resources of Oxford University Herbaria, or visited the Museums or the famous Oxford Botanical Garden.

This project explored the cultural and productive heritage of 5 plant species commonly found in English urban gardens and hedgerows. They were **nettle**, **mint**, **lavender**, **elderflower** and **dog rose**.



Visitors enjoy some fried elderflower fritters.

They are used in the manufacture of medicines, materials and preservatives, and are linked to customs and folklore for hundreds and even thousands of years, locally and also in other cultures around the world.

The project involves the people who live and work in and around **Barracks Lane Community Garden** (BLCG) in Cowley, East Oxford. BLCG is managed by local volunteers for local people.

*Barracks Lane Community Garden is a community-run green space off the Cowley Road in Cowley / East Oxford. It hosts many regular events as well as special and annual events. It is open every weekend from March to October for all to visit and enjoy.*



Formerly a site of abandoned garages, BLCG has been transformed into a thriving oasis in the heart of a growing community.

The project has helped form strong links with **Oxford Spires Academy**, the local school, by working with **Young Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers** who study there. Charlotte our garden steward involved volunteers in developing the knowledge and understanding of the planting in the garden.



Learning to make our own lavender hand-cream.

*Poster 1 (of 6): Introduction*



Three generations learn how to make felt in the Octagonal at BLCG, May 2016.

We have held **4 successful community events** celebrating each of our chosen plants with practical activities, talks and demonstrations.

The project has established BLCG more firmly as a place of learning about the cultural heritage of common plants and the many ways in which they are woven into our history through food and medicine.



Weaving nettles & pressing nettles in our Herbarium.

We have also created our own '**Herbaria**' to celebrate the culmination of the project.

For further information and to download these posters and photos please visit: [www.barrackslanegarden.org.uk](http://www.barrackslanegarden.org.uk)



Thanks to the teachers and students of **Oxford Spires** for their support and enthusiasm. Much appreciation to **Charlotte Attlee** our garden steward, who guided our botanical journeys.

Thanks to **Kate Jury** ([www.OxfordGardenPartners.com](http://www.OxfordGardenPartners.com)) for working with the Young Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers and for creating the Herbaria. Thanks to **Mim Saxl** for the great photos and **Stig** for design.

We are grateful to **Annie Davy** for her friendly organising. And a big thanks to the many members of our **community** who got involved in this project and who shared their enthusiasm and knowledge.



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# Our Heritage of Common Plants

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Poster 2 (of 6):

# Nettles



Nettles are in the genus *Urtica*, and belong to the *Urticaceae* family, which is named after the nettle genus. The Common or Stinging nettles found throughout the UK are the species *Urtica dioica*.

The stings of nettle are formed of hairs on the stem and leaves: when touched the tips break off and the hair becomes like a needle which injects several chemicals creating a painful sting. Nettles are an exclusive food source for caterpillars of Red Admiral, Peacock, Small Tortoise, and Comma butterflies – but they are so abundant in the wild that there is no evidence to show that planting or cultivating nettles in urban gardens helps these species.



Caterpillars of Red Admiral butterfly feed on nettles.

### Nettles and people fibre, medicine, food & folklore

Nettles have a long association with people – they grow well in soil rich in phosphorus, and soil that has been disturbed, so flourish in the wake of agriculture and human habitation.

**Nettle fibre** is made from the bletted (soaked) fibres of the stems, which can then be woven into cloth, or used as string or netting (e.g. fishing nets). There is archeological evidence for these uses of nettles since the Stone Age.



Cloths woven from different plant fibres by Flo Stone.

Nettles feature as a semi-magical plant in several **European folk or fairy stories**. *The Wild Swans* collected by Hans Anderson and *The Six Swans* collected by the Brothers Grimm. Shirts woven from nettles by a sister or a princess liberate brothers and princes from the enchantment of a wicked stepmother or witch, who has turned the young men into swans.

*'When... (nettles)...grow fresh out of the earth they are useful cooked as food for human beings because they purify the stomach and rid it of excess mucus and phlegm.'*

~ Hildegard of Bingen, Twelfth-century abbess, writer and composer



Original illustration by Vilhelm Pedersen for *The Wild Swans*: The princess wasn't able to complete the 11<sup>th</sup> shirt, so the youngest brother still has a wing instead of an arm.

Stone-age 'Venus' figurines have carvings and decorations showing them dressed in string skirts – most likely made from nettles. The discovery of cordage in the Palaeolithic (Stone Age) would have made a huge difference to daily life – for example allowing the construction of hunting and fishing nets, and also of baby slings to allow women to work and wander whilst carrying infants.



Rear view of the Venus of Lespugue, the earliest known representation of spun thread, showing a skirt hanging from below the hips made of twisted fibres, deliberately frayed at the end.

**Chlorophyll** extracted from nettles can be used as a dye, as was done in the second world war by the British army to make camouflage.

In folk and herbal **medicine** nettles are used externally as a cure for arthritis, gout, sciatica, neuralgia, insect bites and nose-bleed. Internally they are used to treat haemorrhage, excessive menstruation, arthritis, rheumatism, gout, and eczema, and to improve heart function.

As a **food** plant nettle leaves are made into teas, soups, and mixed with cereals such as oats to make nettle pudding and nettle burgers.



On Nettle Day we learnt how to take nettle stalks, rub them into strands, comb this into raw fibres.



Then we spun these fibres into a long nettle cord which were then fed into a simple hand-operated loom to make a nettle cloth.



Young asylum seekers from Oxford Spires Academy make string from nettle fibre.



We collected nettles from in the garden, and from nearby. After washing our harvest we cut the leaves from the stalks. While the stalks were taken off to be woven, Phil prepared the leaves for a hearty soup and a delicious potato stew.



# Our Heritage of Common Plants

## Barracks Lane Community Garden

Poster 3 (of 6):

# Mint



Mint is in the family *Lamiaceae*, the same family as Lavender and Dead Nettles, and many other cooking herbs such as Basil, Rosemary, Oregano and Sage.



*Watermint. a valuable native waterside plant, the roots can help to bind together muddy banks and slopes.*

The genus *Mentha* has about 28 separate species, many of which are native to the UK, and most of which grow throughout Europe, Africa, and Asia. The most common in the UK are often referred to as Garden mint, which could be Peppermint, *Mentha x piperita* (an inter-species hybrid between Water mint, *Mentha aquatica*, and Spearmint, *Mentha spicata*). There are several distinctively

flavoured and scented varieties of mint – Apple mint (*Mentha suaveolens*) and Eau de Cologne or Lemon mint, (*Mentha x piperita* 'Citrata').

On Herbs for Health Day we made mint footcream, using essential oil of mint. We taught foot massage and hand massage using the creams. We enjoyed tea made from freshly picked mint leaves

We collected a sample of mint from the garden to make our herbarium specimen, and collected memories and stories about mint.



*At our Herbs for Health day we taught hand massage using mint hand cream made at our workshop.*

### Mint – uses as food, drink & medicine

Mint has been used since ancient times as a cleansing and aromatic herb to protect and drive away bad odours. It would be strewn across floors to release its aroma when trodden upon, and it is a key ingredient of pot pourris and nosegays.

The word **nosegay** comes from Middle English, when 'gay' meant 'ornament', so a nosegay was an ornament that appealed to the nose.

**Mint oil** is an ingredient in many natural insecticides, and also in remedies to cure itching from insect bites.



*Mint jelly*



**Maghrebi tea:** Traditionally the tea is served to guests three times: A first glass is as gentle as life, a second is as strong as love, a third is as bitter as death.

In many countries mint is traditionally served with lamb – as chopped leaves on grilled lamb in the Middle East, and jellies and sauces in the UK and America. Many varieties of mint are used for tea – sometimes the leaves are used alone, or with sugar, and sometimes mixed with traditional teas, such as Chinese green tea.

**Maghrebi tea** is usually made in this way, and is drunk throughout the Middle East, southern Spain and North Africa.



*Cutting mint to make tea brought back pleasant memories for some young asylum seekers.*

Mint has long been used as a medicinal herb, especially associated with the treatment of stomach upsets and chest complaints. **Menthol** is a key ingredient in many natural cold remedies

Modern research indicates that **Peppermint** may be useful in the treatment of irritable bowel syndrome, activating an anti-pain channel in the colon.



*Richard the Lionheart, whose heart was stuffed after his death in 1199 with herbs including mint.*

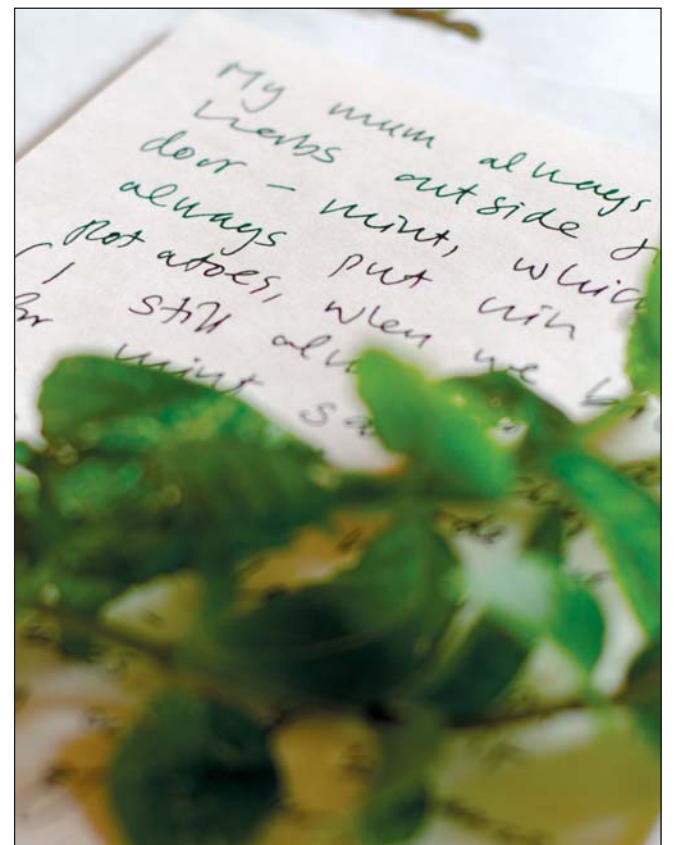
Mint has also been used as an **embalming** herb. The body of King Richard 1 of England "The Lionheart" was divided at his death in 1199 into three pieces to be buried at sites important in his life. Chemical analysis of the remains found in the nineteenth century showed that the heart had been stuffed with herbs, including mint, before embalming.



*Bringing water to the boil to make mint tea.*

### Mint in folklore and mythology

**Minthe** was a naiad or river nymph in Greek mythology. She fell in love with Hades, King of the Underworld and husband of Queen Persephone. Persephone was outraged when Minthe tried to seduce Hades, and so turned her into a creeping but sweet-smelling plant, Mint.



*Mint collected to make a herbarium sample, with a visitor's written memory of her mother collecting mint from the herb patch to cook with potatoes.*



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# Our Heritage of Common Plants

## Barracks Lane Community Garden

Poster 4 (of 6):

# Elder



Elder flowers in May Photo (cc) Christiane Wilke.

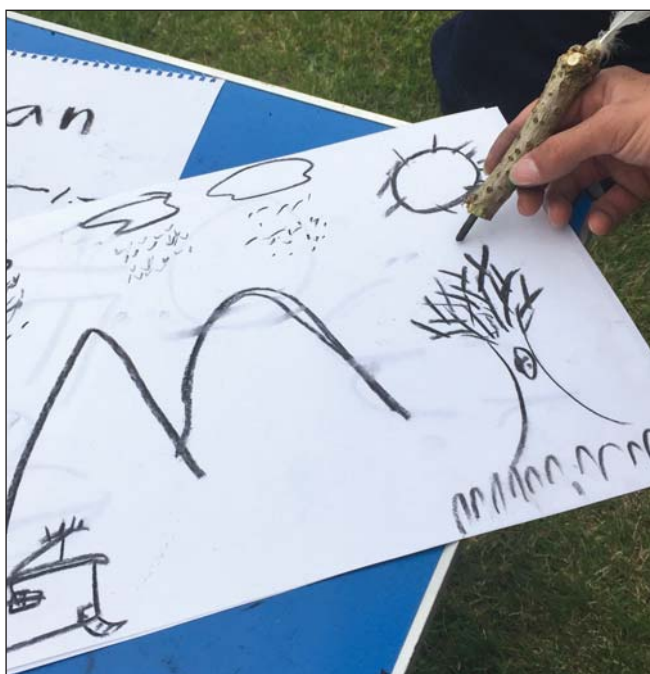
The common elder (*Sambucus nigra*) is part of the *Adoxaceae* family, a small family of around five genera. *Viburnums* are part of the same family. The family is named after the small herbaceous plant, *Adoxa moschatellina*, Moschatel or Muskroot, found throughout most of Britain.

Elder is one of the plant genera that has been re-classified because of modern biochemical methods. It used to be part of the Honeysuckle family, *Caprifoliaceae*. New relationships between plants are now being discovered through morphological and DNA analysis.

The origin of the genus name *Sambucus* is obscure, but it might be from an ancient triangular harp made from elder wood. The species name *nigra* refers to the black berries.

### Elder wood

Elder wood is naturally hollow, and has been used to make musical instruments in ancient and medieval times, as rowlocks for boats (it has a naturally greasy quality), and as the handles of horse whips (the smell drives away flies). Children use the hollow stems as pea shooters.



Hollow Elder wood stem used as a charcoal holder by a young asylum seeker in Barracks Lane Community Garden.

At our Elder event at Barracks Lane Community garden we picked elderflowers for fritters, and fried them in batter on an open fire. We cut elderflower to make a herbarium specimen. We used elderflower stems to make hollow handles to hold our charcoal. With our young asylum seekers we made elderflower cordial – some of them were fasting for Ramadan, so we kept it for later in the month.

### Elder folklore

Elder has been important in European and Asian folklore for millennia. In pre-Christian times there were many beliefs around the goddess or tree spirits that inhabited the elder tree, and it was widely believed to have magical properties that would ward off ill-fortune. Elder trees were often planted around houses to protect them, especially from lightning.

In Christian times tree worship was frowned on, and maybe because of this the Elder acquired sinister associations, the most famous of which being that Judas Iscariot hanged himself from an Elder tree. However, this is unlikely as the Elder is not native to Palestine.

In the popular modern stories of *Harry Potter* by J K Rowling the 'Elder Wand' is an especially powerful and magical wand that is sought by wizards as one of the three 'Deathly Hallows'

### Elder as medicine

Elder has been so consistently used for medicinal purposes it sometimes known as the 'medicine chest' of country people, with flowers and berries especially used.

An infusion or tea made with the flowers is taken to soothe inflammation or as a diuretic.

Preparations containing elderflower are effective in treating sinusitis, and standardised preparations containing extracts or juice of elderberries have been shown to reduce the duration of flu symptoms.

The flowers and berries are taken for various other ailments including coughs, colds and constipation.

Elderberry is used as an immune booster, perhaps supported by the presence of anthocyanins in the berries (chemical compounds that are known to have immunostimulant effects).

Elderflower is also used against diabetes: research has shown that extracts of elderflower stimulate glucose metabolism and the secretion of insulin, lowering blood sugar levels. (Medicinal information from Kew Gardens website).



Elderberries in September.. Photo (cc) Mim Saxl.

### Elder as food & drink

Elderflower **fritters** are popular treats (see recipe below), and **wine** made from the flowers is known as 'Elderflower champagne'. Elderflower **cordial** is still produced at home and commercially. Elderberries make intense **jams**, **jellies** and **syrops**, as well as **wine** – but they are mildly toxic if eaten raw.

### RECIPE: Elderflower fritters

(adapted from Nigel Slater)

**Ingredients:** 100g plain flour  
2 tablespoons light flavoured oil  
175 ml of sparkling mineral or soda water  
1 tablespoon caster sugar  
1 egg white beaten to stand in peaks  
12 to 16 elderflower heads, rinsed in water and shaken dry  
Sunflower or vegetable oil for deep frying

1. Beat the first three ingredients together to make a thick paste, then stir in a tablespoon of sugar. Leave to rest for 30 minutes, then fold in the egg white.
2. Heat the oil in a deep frying pan.
3. Snip the large flower heads into smaller heads, each with a stem, and dip them into the batter, then lower into the oil, pushing them down lightly with the back of a wooden spoon or tongs, or using the stem (mind your fingers!)
4. Fry until pale gold and crisp.
5. Take out and drain on kitchen paper. Enjoy!



Elderflower Fritters (c) of The Kitchen Lioness.



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# Our Heritage of Common Plants

## Barracks Lane Community Garden

Poster 5 (of 6):

# Lavender



Painting of lavender by Ferdinand Baum from the late eighteenth-century *Flora Graeca (Flowers of Greece)* as seen in Oxford University Herbaria by young asylum seekers.

Lavenders are not native to the UK, but are native to large areas of Southern and Mediterranean Europe, North and East Africa, Southwest Asia and Northeast India.



Lavender at BLCG.

Lavenders are in the same botanical family as Mint, *Lamiaceae*. They are all in the genus *Lavandula*, which has 39 species. The most common and widely grown species of lavender is *Lavandula angustifolia*, commonly known as 'English Lavender' and there are several well-known varieties of this named after famous gardens such as 'Hidcote' and 'Munstead'.

Another lavender we often call 'English lavender' is a cross-species hybrid, *Lavandula x intermedia*, a cross between *Lavandula angustifolia* and *Lavandula latifolia* (also known as 'Spike lavender'). Some species, for example French lavender (*Lavandula stoechas*) and Woolly lavender (*Lavandula lanata*) are not fully hardy in the UK.



An alembic for distilling essential oils, reconstructed from a medieval model by historian Romilly Swann.

At our Lavender event at Barracks Lane Community Garden we made Lavender foot cream, and learned how to do a foot massage.

On one of our sessions with young asylum seekers we made lavender essential oil over an open fire using an alembic, reconstructed from a medieval model by our workshop leader Romilly Swann.



Lavender growing in Barracks Lane Community Garden. Photo (cc) Mim Saxl.



Elizabeth 1st encouraged the development of lavender farms in England.

### Lavender and people – perfume, cooking, medicine, and horticulture

Lavender has been in cultivation since ancient Greek and Roman times, as a perfume and as a healing herb with **anti-septic** properties. It is believed that the Ancient Egyptians may also have used Lavender as both a perfume and for embalming.

Although not native to the UK, Lavender has been cultivated here since medieval times, and was used for perfume and bath oil. Queen Elizabeth 1 of England encouraged the development of lavender farms, and was known to use lavender as a cure for migraine and insomnia, as well as enjoying lavender jam. Her father Henry V111 was also a fan – there is a record of an order to a nurseryman Henry Russell of Westminster for six borders of lavender for Henry V111's new bowling alley.

Not just the flower of kings and pharaohs, Lavender has many traditional uses in the homes – lavender bags and lavender favours are still made to scent clothes drawers, and lavender is a traditional component of pot-pourri.



Lavender being prepared to make a specimen for the BLCG Herbaria. Photo (cc) Mim Saxl.

Lavender flowers are used to flavour foods in many parts of the world - in baking, salads, and confectionery.

In medicine essential oil of lavender is known to have anti-septic properties, and lavender honey is also beneficial.

Long used as a remedy for **insomnia** and **anxiety** in herbal medicine and aromatherapy, it is now known that the active ingredients linalool and linalyl acetate found in lavender oil are responsible for these effects.



Lavender hand-cream. Photo (cc) Mim Saxl.

Lavender is a favourite garden flower in many parts of the world, and very much in use today. In the nineteenth century it was widely popularized by the designer and plantswoman Gertrude Jekyll, who valued it for the silver grey foliage as well its fragrance.

### Lavender in folklore

*Lavender's blue, dilly, dilly, lavender's green*

*When I am king, dilly, dilly, You shall be queen*

*Who told you so, dilly, dilly, who told you so?*

*'Twas my own heart, dilly, dilly, that told me so*

The earliest surviving version of this famous folk ditty or nursery rhyme was first recorded in the late seventeenth century, under the name *Diddle Diddle*, or the *Kind Country Lovers*.



BLCG brought asylum-seeking students, and their teachers together with local people, learning to make hand creams.



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# Our Heritage of Common Plants

## Barracks Lane Community Garden

Poster 6 (of 6):



Flowers of *Rosa canina*, also known as the Dog rose, one of the UK's five native wild roses Photo (cc) Roberta F.

Roses are a genus, *Rosa*, in the large botanical family, *Rosaceae*, that includes almost 3000 species, including many common plants: Brambles, Strawberries, Cherry, Plums, Pears, Apples, Rowan, and Hawthorne to name a few. When you look at the flowers of these trees and shrubs you can see the similarity to the flowers of our native wild roses. All have five petals, one of the characteristics of this family.

There are five different species of wild rose in the UK. Dog roses (*Rosa canina*), Field Roses (*Rosa arvensis*) and Sweet briar (*Rosa rubiginosa*) are found throughout the UK, whereas Burnett Rose (*Rosa pimpinellifolia*) and Sherard's Downy Rose (*Rosa sherardii*) are found only in Northern England and Scotland.

### Roses and people

The highly cultivated garden roses we have today are very different from our native roses, but they have been bred from wild roses all over the world. Rose cultivation is recorded as early as 500BC in China.

Roses have been used for perfume and flavouring for thousands of years. Techniques for distilling essential oils from rose petals originated in Persia (modern-day Iran), and spread throughout the world.



Charlotte Attlee, garden steward, introduces children to the plants and ecology of Barracks Lane Community Garden.

# Rose

At our wild rose event at Barracks Lane Community Garden we made rose face cream using essential oil of rose, and learned how to do a simple face massage. We have dog roses growing in our hedge at the bottom of the garden. We cut stems, leaves and flowers to make a herbarium sample for our herbaria collection. Our first cutting in May was of the leaves and stems only, because of the cold Spring the roses were late in flowering.



Volunteers helping to arrange the rose hip sample for the Barracks Lane Community Garden Herbaria.

As well as being used for scent, rose oil is also used in cosmetics to soften and protect skin. Rose water is commonly used to flavour food in the Middle East, and sweets and other confectionery around the world.

Rose hips (the fruit of the rose) are a valuable source of **Vitamin C**. A cup of rose hip pulp has more Vitamin C than 40 fresh oranges - in 1941, during World War 2 there was a scheme for the voluntary gathering of rose hips to be made into Vitamin C syrup. Children were paid 3d a pound, and over 120 tons were gathered.



Children collecting Rose hips for vitamin C in the 1940s.

Rose hips used to be known as 'Itchy-Coo' and were used by children to make itching powder. Roses have religious symbolism throughout history. In ancient Rome they were associated with the goddess Venus, and in Christianity with the Virgin Mary. In Sufism the rose is associated with divine love. Roses are represented in some of the earliest art in the world - the first known painting of a rose is a fresco at Knossos in Crete.

*I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,  
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,  
Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,  
With sweet musk-roses and with eglantine*  
~ Oberon, a King and jealous lover in Shakespeare's  
*A Midsummer's Night Dream.*



Sandro Botticelli was well known for his use of roses in his works, such as in *Birth of Venus*, where her sweat turned into roses as they fell into the sea.

The term **Wars of the Roses**, referring to the civil war over succession to the English throne fought between the Houses of York and Lancaster in the Middle Ages, was only coined in the nineteenth century. During the medieval war the House of York used the White Rose as its symbol, but the Lancastrian Red Rose was not introduced until the end of the wars at the Battle of Bosworth Field.

Breeding new roses is an important economic activity in horticulture. Over thousands of years breeders have hybridised wild rose species to produce different hybrids and cultivars. One of the main characteristics breeders select for is the mutation of stamens into additional petals. This produces the densely petalled flowers familiar to us, rather than the five-petalled flowers of wild species.

The '**Peace Rose**' was bred by Francis Meilland in the 1930s, and originally named after his wife. As war approached he sent cuttings from France all over Europe. At the end of the war the rose was launched in the



The '**Peace**' rose bred by Francis Meilland in France.

United States as the '**Peace**' rose, and a bloom was given to every delegate at the first meeting of the United Nations in San Francisco with a note reading '*We hope that the 'Peace' rose will influence men's thoughts for everlasting world peace.*'



Cutting a sample of rosehips for our community herbarium.

