

# Newtown Road Cemetery Plant of the Month

## Ribwort or Narrow leaved Plantain

There are many different British plantains in no way related to another plantain species from which we get our bananas. The name plantago comes from the Latin planta meaning sole of the foot and refers to the way the leaves splay out on the ground at first, only later becoming vertical. The plant may grow up to 50cm tall and is found flowering in grassland, field hedges, tracks and as a weed in gardens from April into the autumn.



The complex brown oval flower spikes are balanced on top of thin wiry stems and are made up of many individual florets each of which is a complete flower in itself.

It is a rather inconspicuous plant but a useful one as it is a food source for herbivorous insects and also provides seeds for birds, especially goldfinch, later in the

year. Hay from pastures which include plantains makes very valuable winter feed for cattle and sheep. However, care is needed to store such hay as the plant may result in damp patches and lead to spontaneous combustion.

Although not often seen on present day menus, the seed can be a source of starch and the leaves can be eaten - better raw as cooking toughens them. If you are curious enough to try them, you can also benefit from the calcium, potassium and Vitamins A, C and K as well as the fibre they contain.



Medically they can claim to have anti-microbial and antihistamine properties and so mediaeval folk valued them to treat head wounds, dog bites, stings and to make eye lotion. Plantain leaf products can be bought for various health and beauty purposes.

Finally, those who grew up in simpler times may remember the fierce games of “soldiers” we used to play as children in the summer holidays. We twisted the stem to shoot the plantain heads at our “enemies”.

*Joan Stacey*