

## On the Origin of the Term 'Weed'

LAWRENCE J. KING, Boyce Thompson Institute for Plant Research, Inc.

It is of interest to examine the history of a word that is so commonly used yet so difficult to precisely define. The Oxford English Dictionary (1933) traces the earliest usage in the English language back to the Anglo-Saxon "weod" as used by Aelfred (c. 888), and indicates it is of unknown origin. However, further search has revealed that "weed" might be derived from earlier forms of the German *weyt* (c. 1150), the Dutch *weet* (c. 1597) and *weeda*, the Belgian *weedt* (c. 1576) etc. for woad or dyeweed, (*Isatis tinctoria* L.).

A comparative study of the equivalents used for "weed" in several of the Germanic and Romance languages has shown how descriptive many of these terms are (4). Some examples here would be the French, *mauvaise herbe*, the Italian *malerba*, and the German, *Unkraut*. Attempts to trace our modern term back to any recognizable equivalents in the Latin language have been unsuccessful. Rather, since a goddess of weeding, *Runcina*, was worshipped during the Augustinian period variations such as *runco*, *erunco*, and *runciatio* acquired the meaning of "weeding." The descriptive term for the leaf margin, *runcinate*—as applied to the dandelion leaf, for example—appears to be our only current derivative (4, 9).

The cruciferous genus, *Isatis*, consists of some 30 species. *Isatis tinctoria* is apparently a native in south-eastern Russia where it is recorded as growing on exposed hillsides and in brushy places. It is one of the most widely distributed species of the genus, and occurs throughout Europe, North Africa, and Asia as far as China and Japan. Woad, or "Devil's Weed" is also common in western Tibet, Afghanistan, etc. occurring both wild and cultivated. It is also grown in certain regions of China and yields the indigo of that country. The seeds were also used as a source of oil (2, 5, 7).

It is a biennial or perennial herb with characteristics of a plant belonging to the temperate zone. The active period in England extends from about February to November, the resting period from December to January. The rosette is formed the first season, with flowers and fruit forming the second season. The foliage leaves live throughout the winter. It flowers in July and sets seed in September. Its cultivation from the earliest times has led to its occasional appearance in an apparently spontaneous state in other parts of Europe, including England. It is one of those species which occasionally appears in plenty when ground is newly turned, doubtless on the site of former woad-crops, from which stragglers have persisted and seeded from time to time. Perhaps here its weedy aspect becomes obvious. In England it is often found in old lime pits and chalk quarries—thus indicating an alkaline soil requirement. It thrives in rich soil and soon exhausts it to such an extent that in former times the woad crop had to be frequently shifted to new land (1, 6).

Knowledge of this plant extends far back into antiquity. It is briefly described by Dioscorides and illustrated under the Greek name "Isatis" (8). In the ancient Latin language it was referred to as *vitrum*, and a reference occurs in Caesar's *De bello gallico* (V, cap. xiii): "*omnes vero se britanni vitro inficiunt, quod coeruleum efficit colorem atque hoc horridiores sunt in pugna aspectu.*" In later Latin *vitrum* became *glastum*.

Dr. J. B. Hurry in 1930 published an extensive study of the woad plant and its culture (3). This plant had been cultivated since ancient times for its blue pigment with the name *wād* applied in England to this plant as far back as the 13th Century, although nearly extinct as a crop since 1900. Hurry in examining the comparative philology of "woad" refers to the study of M. Heyne who suggested that this problem involves a root which takes two forms. The first is *wis-*, as met with in the Greek *isatis* (or variations in spelling thereof) and in the Gothic *wiz-dila*. The second form is *wi* passing into the Latin *vi-trum*, the old German *wai-d*, Middle German *waidso*, Old German *wād*, and finally into the English *woad*.

It is interesting that the two most ancient forms appearing in print, *wād* for woad, and *weod* for weed maintained separate and distinct meanings although they sounded much alike and following our present analysis they were derived from some common root. Just how "weod" or "weed" arose from the early Germanic forms listed earlier is not clear. However, some speculation may be in order. Since the proto-Germanic forms given in the early part of this paper were used as common names for the woad plant, they, or their modern counterparts, never acquired the current meaning of our term "weed". In the German language, for example, *weyt* or *waidt* being pre-empted for the crop plant *Isatis*, another word, *Unkraut* came to mean quite well the modern equivalent of "weed." In this connection it is interesting to observe that the verb *wieden*, "to weed" is retained in the Dutch language although the noun here is *Onkruid*—a variant of "Unkraut".

Perhaps "weed" is another example of language as an accident of usage. It alone of all the equivalents for "weed" in both the Germanic and Romance languages has no intrinsic meaning or self-description that would appear appropriate. The suggestions for origin proposed are certainly only tentative—i.e., until further proof can be marshaled, or the entire argument invalidated by new information. One last question arises, has *Isatis tinctoria* ever been classed as a weed? The answer is "no" for the majority of the countries examined—the two exceptions being Chile and a localized area in western Virginia. Why should this be so? It probably resides in two aspects of the life of the plant—the fact that it is dicyclic, requiring two seasons for maturity which would largely rule it out as a weed of annually cultivated ground; and secondly its great dependence upon seeding and proper care for its survival since a successive series of cultigens were selected, developed and carried throughout several millenia.

## Literature Cited

1. DUNN, S. T. 1905. Alien Flora of Britain.
2. FISCHER, H. 1929. Mittelalterliche Pflanzenkunde.
3. HURRY, J. B. 1930. The Woad Plant and its Dye. Oxford University Press, London.
4. KING, L. J. 1957. Some Early Forms of the Weed Concept. *Nature* **179**: 1366.
5. LEHMANN, E. 1931. Erinnerungen an den Waid. *Der Naturforscher* **7**: 11.
6. OTTO, J. J. 1794. Ganz neue Entdeckung der in Deutschland noch unbekannten wahren, achten, zahmen Waidtpflanze . . . Frankfurt am Main, 72 pp.
7. SCHULTZ, O. E. 1936. *Isatis*, in A. Engler's, "Die Natürlichen Pflanzenfamilien," Zweite Auflage, Band 17b, W. Engelmann, Leipzig. pp. 420-422.
8. SPRENGEL, C. *Dioscorides opera* I (1829), 335; II (1830), 489.
9. YANCEY, P. J. 1945. Origins from Mythology of Biological Names and Terms. Bios Classroom Series No. 5, pp. 47, (from Bios 16).