

Order Dipsacales
Family Caprifoliaceae

Honeysuckle

Lonicera periclymenum

Féithleann (bainne gamhna)

June – September

Common



Catherine Keena

Honeysuckle is a liana, a woody vine that winds its way in a clockwise spiral around trees and through hedges, scarcely noticed until it breaks into flower in summer. When it twines round a trunk or branch its embrace can be so tight it leaves a permanent spiral groove. In the early Irish tale known as *The Death of Fergus* honeysuckle is described as ‘monarch of the forests of Ireland, whom none may hold captive, whose mark of sovereignty is that he can hug all tough trees in his embrace.’ According to the tale, burning honeysuckle would bring tragic consequences: ‘if you burn the pliant woodbine, wailings for misfortune will abound; dire extremity at weapons’ points or drowning in great waves will follow.’

The flowers are clusters of little trumpets, red in bud, and variously red, pink, yellow or cream when they open. At this stage honeysuckle cannot be missed, especially late in the day when its wonderful perfume is at its strongest. It opens around 7 in the evening, taking no

more than a few minutes to do so. Less than an hour beforehand the anthers dehisce in bud, but the stigma is too far in front of them to come in contact with the pollen. As they open, the flowers move from the erect position in which the buds are held to take up a horizontal stance, and the five long stamens extend stiffly far forward of the opening of the corolla, like the fingers of a hand.

The corolla flares out and splits into two lobes as the flower opens. The corolla is generally cream-coloured on the outside, but pure white inside so that in the gathering dusk the flowers light up the hedge. The top lobe has three or four teeth and curls upward, whereas the bottom one is strap-like and curled backward, so that it cannot act as a platform for the long-tongued moths that visit the flowers in search of the abundant nectar secreted at the base of the corolla tube. Because the flowers mature from the outside of the cluster inwards, they are all at different stages of development.

The flowers have a marvellous way of

preventing self-pollination. Late in the afternoon the stamens split open and the flower moves into a horizontal position. On the first night the flower is clear creamy white in colour, and exudes a powerful scent until after darkness falls. At this stage the style, which projects 25mm beyond the gaping mouth of the corolla, is curved downward, where the newly-released pollen cannot come in contact with it. The first moth to visit the flower alights on the forward-projecting stamens, which also extend beyond the mouth of the flower. Each anther is balanced like a see-saw on its filament, making it inevitable that the moth will be dusted with pollen on its abdomen as it seeks the nectar at the base of the corolla tube.

During the course of the next day the flower changes colour from cream to yellowish, the lips curl further back and the corolla tube curves slightly downwards. The stamens wither and the stigma curls back into a horizontal position, so that it is perfectly placed to

come in contact with the pollen-covered abdomen of moths visiting the flower the following night. The yellow colour is rather less attractive to visiting moths, which means they will tend to first visit the white flowers, where they will pick up pollen that can be transferred to the receptive stigmas of yellow flowers later in the evening. The convolvulus hawkmoth (*Agrius convolvuli*), privet hawkmoth (*Sphinx ligustri*) and silver Y (*Autographa gamma*) are among the main visitors. Once pollination has been effected the flowers turn orange, before they are shed.

The clusters of dark red berries are a conspicuous sight in woodland and hedgerow in the autumn. They are said to be poisonous, though according to one old authority ‘the ripe seed gathered and dried in the shadow and drunk removeth wearisomeness,’ and they are eagerly eaten by domestic fowl as well as many wild birds. Of the 100 or so species of *Lonicera* found worldwide, a dozen or so have been employed in herbal medicine, our native species among them. It had many applications, but was taken particularly as an expectorant and laxative. A conserve made from the flowers was considered of value in the treatment of asthma, and if used as an ointment it would ‘clear your skin of morpew, freckles and sun-burnings, or whatever else discolours it.’ Gerard described some of its uses in his usual elegant 16th century prose:

The ripe seed gathered and dried in the shadow and drunk for four days together, doth waste and consume away the hardness of the spleen and removeth weariness, helpeth the shortness and difficulty of breathing, cureth the hicket [hiccough], etc. A syrup made of the flowers is good to be drunk against diseases of the lungs and spleen.

Adam Lonicer, after whom Linnaeus named the genus, was a prominent 16th century physician and naturalist. Our species was formerly known as *Lonicera caprifolium*: the latter word means ‘goat’s leaf,’ recording the fondness of that animal for the foliage.

Two other species of honeysuckle are found growing wild in Offaly. **Wilson’s honeysuckle** (*Lonicera nitida*) was introduced from China nearly a century ago and became very popular for the planting of thick hedges

close to the farmstead; it is now firmly established in the vicinity of derelict houses in particular. **Fly honeysuckle** (*Lonicera xylosteum*) is very rare: I have only seen it in one wood in the county.

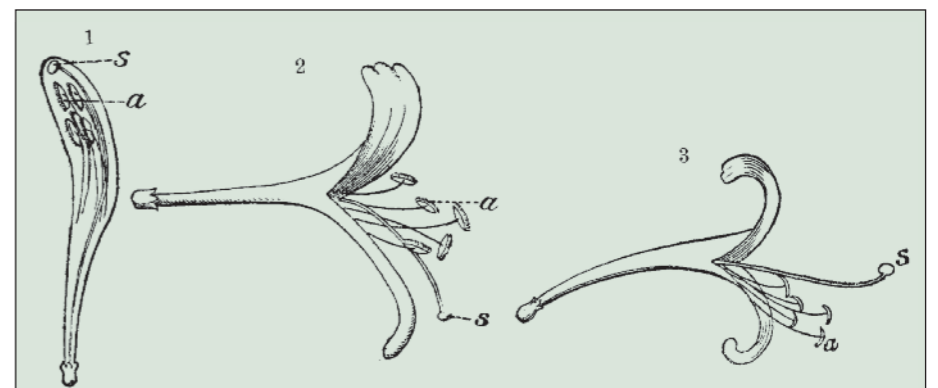


Privet hawkmoth



Convolvulus hawkmoth

Silver Y



The structure of the flower of honeysuckle (after Paul Knuth)

(1) Bud shortly after opening. The stigma is already mature and the stamens have dehisced, but automatic self-pollination is prevented by the erect position and the greater length of the style. (2) Flower on the first evening. The pollen-covered anthers are in front of its entrance, the style is bent downwards so much that the stigma is not liable to be touched by visiting hawkmoths. The upper- and under-lips are but slightly curved, and are white in colour. (3) The same on the second evening. The style has now curved upwards so much that the stigma is in front of the entrance to the flower; on the other hand, the stamens have curved downwards and the anthers are shriveled. The upper- and under-lips are rolled back so as to occupy less space, and have become yellow.

a, anther; **s**, stigma.