

The Pasque Flower – iconic plant of Barnack Hills and Holes



The beautiful Pasque Flower (*Pulsatilla vulgaris*) is a nationally rare plant, found on only 18 sites in Britain, and is listed as vulnerable to extinction. It is the county flower of Cambridgeshire.

Pasque Flower is a member of the buttercup family (Ranunculaceae) and only grows on short, grazed turf over limestone. It flowers in profusion at Barnack Hills and Holes in April and May, usually starting around Easter – there are said to be over 20,000 flowers here. The plant is covered in long silky hairs, and the seeds have distinctive long plumes, which help dispersal by the wind. Interestingly, the flower has no petals – the purple bells are made up of sepals, which are modified leaves. At the centre of the flower is a large boss of yellow anthers, which bear the pollen. The flowers are pollinated by bees and wasps.

At Barnack, most of the population of Pasque Flowers grows in areas which are marked off by posts and string, to protect them from trampling. This is important even after the flowers have disappeared, as the buds for the next year are formed in late summer.

The survival of the Pasque Flower at Barnack is dependent on grazing, which is carried out during the winter. The rabbits also help with this! Like most wild flowers, they grow best in soils with low fertility – just one of the reasons why dog owners are asked to remove their pet's excrement from the site.

The name "Pasque Flower" is said to derive from the Latin word *pascha*, meaning Easter; the petals may have been used to stain eggs for Easter celebrations. According to legend, it was supposed to spring from the blood of fallen Viking warriors!

Botanists from all over the UK and further afield visit Barnack Hills and Holes, especially at Pasque Flower time, and the Friends are proud to help protect this lovely site for the enjoyment of present and future generations of visitors.

Alyson Freeman, May 2014