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Barnacle Geese – Caristiona nic Beathain

The legend of the Barnacle Goose is at least as old as the 12th Century. One of the earliest mentions of it, is found in the “Topogrphica Hiberniae of Giraldis Cambrensis, 1187. He protests against the eating of Barnacle Geese during Lent.

“There are many birds which are called Bernacae which nature produces in a manner contrary to nature and very wonderful. They are like marsh geese but smaller. They are produced from fir-timber tossed about at sea and are at first like geese upon it. Afterwards they hang down by their beaks as if from a sea-weed attached to the wood and are enclosed in shells that they may grow more freely....in no corner of the world have they been known to build a nest. Hence the bishops and clergy in some parts of Ireland are in the habit of partaking of these birds on fast days without scruple. But in doing so they are led into sin. For if anyone were to eat the leg of our first parent, although he was not born of flesh, that person could not be adjudged innocent of eating flesh” [1].

Religious orders were divided as to whether Barnacle Geese could be eaten as flesh or fish. Pope Innocent III took the view that they were flesh, and prohibited the eating of them, during Lent at the Lateran Council of 1215. In 1277 Rabbi Izak prohibited the eating of them for all Jews, because they were neither fish nor flesh.

“There are many birds called barnacles, which nature produces in a way which contradicts her own laws. They are like marsh geese, but smaller. They first appear as growths on pine-logs floating on the water. Then they hang from seaweed on the log, their bodies protected by a shell so that they may grow more freely;...In due course they grow a covering of strong feathers and either fall into the water or change to free flight in the air. You will never have seen them anywhere on land, breeding or building nests. For this reason, in some parts of Ireland, bishops and men of religion eat them during times of fasting without committing sin, because they are neither flesh, nor born of flesh” [2].

Not only was there controversy over the actual form of Barnacle Geese, whether fish or flesh, but there was also some controversy over the actual existence of the birds. Pope Pius II was so convinced of them that when he visited Scotland he wanted to see the Geese, but was told that they were only to be found on the Orkney Islands.

“There are found in the north parts of Scotland and the Islands adjacent, called Orchades, certain trees wheron do grow certaine shells of a white colour tending to russet, wherein are contained living creatures; which shells in time of maturitie do open, and out of them grow living things, which falling into the water do become fowles, which we call Barnakles; in the North of England, brant Geese; and in Lancashire, tree Geese: but the other do fall upon the land perish and come to nothing” [3].

Albertus Magnus and Roger Bacon, both eminent physicians of their time derided the myth. Albertus Mangnus in particular went and examined the Barnacles of Scotland and Ireland and could

find no substance to the story. However the myth of the Barnacle Goose endured until the 1650's when the myth of the Barnacle Goose started to move out of favour.

Not only clergy but also other people used Barnacle Geese as an excuse to eat meat during religious holidays, in particular during lent. So for the rein-actors out there who like to be as period as possible, eating Geese over festival could be managed, if you were sure it was a Barnacle Goose.

References

1. Rhode, E. S. The Old English Herbals Dover Publications Inc. NY, USA. 1922: 109
2. Barber, R. Bestiary, being an English version of the Bodleian Library, Oxford M.S. Bodley 764 with all the original miniatures reproduced in facsimile. Trans and Intro by Richard Barber. Boydell Press. Woodbridge. UK. 1999: 120-121
3. Gerard, John The Herbal or General History of Plants. Dover Publications INC. NY, USA. 1975: 1587.

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Building a Wattle Fence – Sigurd Trygvarsson

Wattle fencing is an age-old technique pictured in numerous illustrations throughout the middle ages. Perhaps the reasons for it being such a popular choice of fencing are linked to its ease of construction and the availability and low cost [as compared to older timber or stone], willow and hazel two of the most common trees used in this type of fence are both fast growing, produce long straight branches, and when grown in coppices [trees regularly cut short and allowed to re-grow] are both highly productive. Judging from the illustrations it seems that all sections of society used this technique, although at times it appears that the more affluent, often opted for stone or mature timber in their gardens. Wattle fences were also used to enclose orchards and in animal enclosures.

How To Build A Wattle Fence

It is quite simple to build one of these fences.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Wooden stakes or straight branches [2.5cm to 6cm in diameter]
- Freshly cut straight branches [canes] 2.5cm in diameter and at least 1.5m in length

TOOLS

- Pruning saw

- Mallet
- Secateurs
- Crowbar or pointy stick

STEP 1: draw a line where you want the fence to be, dig a shallow trench [5cm] along this line.

STEP 2: every 30 cm place a stake, do this by marking the spot then making a hole with the crow bar or pointy stick, hammer the stake into this hole with the mallet.

STEP 3: choose some of the thicker branches [as you go remove any side branches and leaves] weave them into the stakes, alternate the branches in the same way you would weave a basket. Keep doing this until you reach the desired height. [mine is about 80cm high]

STEP 4: when you have finished this go through and weave smaller branches into the gaps. Trim off any branches that stick out too much.

You now have a wattle fence that can be used as a backdrop to an herb garden or as a fence to keep out small dogs or children .The more uniform the branches are, the more even and formal the end result will be.

NOTES ON CONSTRUCTION

This is based on the fence I have just built, mine is made from shrub clippings from around the garden and I have used eucalypt branches for the stakes. I found that rounded branches perhaps even slightly green are the better than tomato stakes as they bend rather than break when put under pressure. Almost any shrub or tree with long straight branches is suitable; the quicker growing it is the better as you then have a fast growing self-replacing source of fencing. Some shrubs that could be used are ...Hibiscus [including the deciduous hibiscus], fruit tree stems, willow [possibly the easiest to work with], wattle, privet, and lots of others.

So why build a wattle fence?

The need to replace a section of wire fence around my gardens so I could use the wire to possum proof other sections of the garden, and the desire to have a totally home grown fence made from sustainable materials were the main reasons. The other reasons were to make a fence that looked appealing and that was capable of keeping the chickens and the occasional wallaby out of the garden. This fence makes a nice backdrop to the garden and is much more aesthetically pleasing than the original wire fence.

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