

All in a Day's Work

John Akeroyd – Botanist

PROFILE

John studied botany at St Andrews University in Scotland, from where he went on to Cambridge University to obtain a doctorate – on the ecological genetics of weeds. After research and teaching in botany at Trinity College, Dublin, and Reading University, with plant-collecting expeditions to Greece, Macedonia and Turkey, he became a freelance consultant and writer on botany and plant conservation. He contributes regularly to both scientific journals and popular magazines. An expert on European plants, he has devoted the last six years to a project in Romania, helping promote sustainable farming and conservation of unique plant- and wildlife-rich countryside. Since 1986 he has visited Sherkin Island Marine Station, and edited *'The wild plants of Sherkin, Cape Clear and adjacent Islands of West Cork'* (1996).



Photo: Robbie Murphy

What was your most exciting discovery?

I first visited Romania in June 2000. Within two hours, on my first walk, I knew I'd discovered the finest wildflower meadows in Europe, and nobody knew they were there! But my best ever find was a tiny, crimson wild carnation, Deptford Pink, on an island just 5km from Sherkin Island – a plant new for Ireland! I can still feel the excitement of that moment on a cold, grey, drizzly late August afternoon.

Do you work alone or as a team?

I certainly spend too much time alone (except for my cat) on the computer, but our work in Romania involves a team of local botanists and British colleagues. It's important to bounce ideas off others, and get together for a bit of craic!

What would you have done if you weren't a botanist?

In another universe I'd perhaps like to have been a folk-rock musician, probably on electric bass guitar, in a dance band (English folk, sorry, not Irish!). Or a marine biologist: nobody can resist the sheer diversity in a rockpool. My teachers at school (other than the late great Oleg Polunin) wanted me to be an industrial chemist or a businessman. I've never regretted being a botanist and ever since my teens I've wanted to write, to communicate. Too many scientists never tell the world about what gets them excited!

So you never listened to those who discouraged you?

No, I have a passion for plants and there is still so much work to be done. If you have a passion, for heaven's sake follow it through!

A Day in the Life of John Akeroyd

Where do you work?

I've my office in a friend's garden, surrounded by plants and wildlife. There I have a library, a computer and chaotic boxes of files of papers and articles on botany, conservation and plant uses.

Have you always been interested in plants?

Yes, ever since I can remember I've been fascinated by wild and garden plants and nature generally. I was also lucky at school to be taught by enthusiastic and famous botanist Oleg Polunin (who himself visited Sherkin in the early 1950s). He encouraged me to pursue a career in botany and to find a job outside of university.

What's the best thing about your job?

Freelance life is precarious but you're your own boss and can usually work where and when you want. I get to see plenty of interesting plants (and animals!).

What's the worst?

Frustration at reading dreary reports and articles by government and university scientists who spend far too much time in the office rather than seeing real nature out in the field.

Do you travel with your job?

Indeed – all over Europe, mostly to Greece, Romania and Ireland in recent years. I love these countries: the people, plants, wildlife, food and scenery. Looking for plants you get out into the villages for an intimate glimpse of older, in many ways better, ways of life.

John works in Romania helping to conserve a unique plant- and wildlife-rich countryside.



Photo: Bill Taylor



Photo: Min Wood