

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed May 8, 1930.

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THE POOR MAN'S WEATHER-GLASS

The common pimpernel (*Anagallis arvensis* L.)--the plant that, in Tennyson's poem, "dozed on the lea," and that supplied the theme and title of a lately popular novel by the Baroness Orczy--is a native of the Old World, widely naturalized in North America. For generations it has been known as the "poor man's weather-glass," because it is supposed to close its blossoms before a shower. This habit is mentioned by Gerard, the 16th century herbalist; also in "The Shepherd of Banbury's Rules," first published in 1744, and in many old rhymes; e.g.:

"Pimpernel, pimpernel, tell me true
Whether the weather be fine or no;
No heart can think, no tongue can tell
The virtues of the pimpernel."

It is only in recent years that anybody has undertaken to investigate the prophetic powers ascribed to this plant, and they turn out to have been ridiculously overrated. An Englishman, N.L. Silvester, made frequent examinations of pimpernel plants growing in the immediate vicinity of a weather station. A total of nearly 250 observations of the plants showed that the blossoms normally open in the morning and close in the afternoon, but fail to open unless the relative humidity of the air falls below about 80 per cent. Apparently the process is not affected by other weather elements or by the intensity of daylight. The pimpernel is, therefore, a crude hygroscope. If its blossoms are found closed in the middle of the day, fairly high humidity is indicated, but this does not mean, necessarily, that rain is at hand. Neither does an open blossom mean that the weather will be dry, for Silvester found blossoms open seven times when rain was actually falling!

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