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The scarlet pimpernel has gained a reputation as a predictor of weather and has been called a poor-man's weather-glass or shepherd's weather-glass

Can plants really predict the weather?

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Garden Tales

I think I watched too many cartoons as a child. Whenever I hear Wagner's "Ring" series, I immediately think of the 1957 classic "What's Opera" with Elmer Fudd, dressed as a Valkyrie, chasing a similarly costumed Bugs Bunny. Whenever I hear of the scarlet pimpernel, I think of the 1954 Daffy Duck classic "The Scarlet Pimpernickel."

The scarlet pimpernel (*Anagallis arvensis*) is a tiny annual herb native to Europe that has become a weed in our gardens. It was also the signature of the "League of the Scarlet Pimpernel" in the 1905 book "The Scarlet Pimpernel" by Baroness Orczy, which was set in 1792 during the French Revolution.

Originally a play in London in 1903, this became extremely popular and was later made into a film in 1934 with Leslie Howard as Sir Percy Blakeney, a baronet, and Merle Oberon as his wife, Marguerite St. Just. Sir Percy was elusive, known only by the floral signature, so it is no wonder that Nelson Mandela later became known as the "Black Pimpernel" in eluding the police in South Africa.

The scarlet pimpernel has also gained a reputation as a predictor of weather and has been called poor-man's weather-glass or shepherd's weather-glass. If the scarlet pimpernel has its flowers fully expanded in the morning, then there is no rain expected. It is also known as shepherds' clock or John-go-to-bed-at-noon because it closes its blossoms before 2 p.m.

Common chickweed (*Stellaria media*) also has a reputation that states if the flowers expand boldly and fully, then no rain is expected for four hours. Supposedly, the

different species of trefoil (*Desmodium* and *Lotus* spp.) contract their leaves at the approach of a storm and have thus earned the name "husbandman's barometer." Oak (*Quercus*) and ash (*Fraxinus*) trees can also supposedly predict the weather a few days in advance: "If the oak flowers before the ash, we shall have a splash; if the ash flowers before the oak, we shall have a soak."

Have you ever noticed that rhododendron leaves curl during the winter? Rhododendrons close their leaves with the approach of cold weather, completely contracting at 20 degrees Fahrenheit, and then expand with a rise in temperature, fully opening at 60 degrees Fahrenheit.

Sunflowers (*Helianthus* spp.) are aptly named because their flowers will turn and follow the sun, and many plants with similar movements have been called "turnsols" or "heliotropes." Thus, sow-thistle (*Sonchus arvensis*) has been called turnsole because it turns to follow Old Sol's face, while the poet's marigold (*Calendula officinalis*) has been called a heliotrope ("helios," Greek for sun plus "trope," turning of sun, as in the origin of the word "tropic").

Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call (302) 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the Herbarium, and call (302) 857-6408 (Dr. Arthur Tucker) for more information about this article.