

Walk in the Woods (Midsummer's fern) 2010

(Mythological fern blossom search in Aizpute)
(Provided information was gathered from Lithuania and Latvia, based on the literature, folktales and stories)

TIME

Every year from June 22 to June 24 Lithuania and Latvia celebrate the shortest night and the longest day in their calendar. From centuries ago the shortest night was considered to be magical. Lithuanians used to celebrate this feast as Daw Feast, latvians as Linguo Feast. When the Christianity came to Baltic lands this feast was related to st. John's name-day. By the time of the feast women gather various herbs because they believe that their healing features are even increased by then. The most important part of this feast is to attempt to find a fern blossom over the night. People believe that the fern blossom grows all year long and blooms for a slight period only at night of the feast.

These fern species can be found in Lithuanian and Latvian folklore. The following presents a few fragments from the folklore:

FOLKTALE

In old Baltic culture blossom of a fern should be blooming during Summer's Solstice. It is a rare phenomenon but even so people still give their best to look for it and if they try hard enough they find it. For example, a story tells about a man who accidentally finds a fern blossom without understanding that as the blossom got inside his shoe while the man was walking through a field of ferns. Suddenly everything started glowing with a strange light a man became capable of understanding animal speech even the fireflies talking with each other was clearly heard. A man sat for a bit to rest removed his shoes and a magical blossom fell, in an eye blink the miracles ended. Not even finding a fern blossom is difficult but to save it as well. The world is so mysterious that only at the moments like this a man is able to see that, to feel that. This is the main purpose of the fern blossom.

INSTRUCTION / How to look for a fern blossom

You can only search for a fern blossom by yourself without any company. Going to the forest you cannot turn back to glance. In a middle of a forest you should be able to find a fern. Lay a handkerchief or kerchief beneath it then draw a circle around the fern with a rowan spray (elder people believed that the rowan protects from even spirits and witches). After that a vessel with holy water should be placed nearby then lit a candle and pray. While waiting on a fern to bloom it is a strong possibility that the evil spirits and the forest spirits will try to interrupt but you must be strong and brave as well as focused and never glance back to resist the evil. After some time the fern should drop its blossom, it will glowing-red or glowing-rainbow color but will remind you of a moon or a star. Then you should cut your finger and place a blossom under your skin, that way you will not lose it.

LOCAL PEOPLE / Fragments from interviews

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- Is there a herb that, let's suppose, to attract the fellows? -Well, fern should be the right one for that. [...] - Zinta, Do you know how one should look for the fern flower? - Oh, those years have already passed for me... - But generally? - Well, generally. Do you know what 'fern flower' means metaphorically? - yes, yes [...] - Well, yes, it doesn't have any other meaning. Well, fern is a spore plant, it doesn't blossom. - Jā. - You should put to work your imagination, then it maybe blossoms. - What do the people think about it, how do they imagine it? - Well, how? I have seen it drawn, but that's just pure fantasy. it doesn't blossom like that. It doesn't blossom at all, because it has spores under the leaves. - And what kind of flower was drawn there? [...] - It's something like a sausage. Like this, and it shines and like a cross... [...] - As the Midsummer night is the shortest, it blossoms only at midnight. Because there's no other time for it to blossom, it's bright all the other time [...] - Can you try to find it at any forest? - You must try to find it in two, at any forest, otherwise there's no chance finding it. That's hard to tell but that's the way it is.

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- Here's some more interest about the fern flower, do you know anything about that? - That's a legend, they don't blossom, I know that, but some happen to see them blossoming (laughs). You should lie on the ferns right now, they grow very near Aizpute, you know. Don't you know that? - Where exactly? - Drive through Štakldang and then there is a bridge and then you turn, you can drive away from Štakldang to Padure directly. - Jā. - And there are they in the wood. And the ferns are very good for putting them into the pillows and under the sheets and to lie over them and they have an effect on the legs and bones. Those kind of ferns are necessary for that. - Just use the green? - Well, for sleeping. For the compresses always put green ones. - Maybe you remember any stories about the fern flower? - Well, it's an idea that came to my mind, it's no use to listen to this tale. On the real Midsummer night you take a real good partner. And then you drive where I told you. Then you'll have the whole story. And that will be the real story, that real pleasure. Just walk through them. And then some wishes appear. [...] They will have an aroma and you can pluck them and wrap each other up in them and pluck them for sleeping and if everything's ok then you'll be fine. And until the morning there will be dew, go through it. There is dew all over in the morning. You must sleep in the dew. Well, the stories are similar to this. [...] You must search for the flower. The flower is only from 23-24 on that night. You won't get it any other time.

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- Of your knowledge, where the fern could be used?
- Can be used in a bath and for laying on it as well.
- Can be placed into bed. Possible to create a sheet which heals from rheumatism. Also helps to sleep well and pillows can be made from its material. -Not recommended to drink as it is poisonous but might be possible to use for homeopatical medicine. -A plucked fern can be placed above the underground flow crossing dot to neutralize negative energies. -In your opinion, what is the meaning of the blossom of a fern? -This subject should be discussed in philosophical terms as no one ever saw this phenomenon. This can be described as some sort of energetical power from our Father sky and Mother earth. The blossom is a connection between energies. Therefore, the blossom searching is on a longest day of year – best time for animals and plants. During this short period of time the animals and plants consume a bit of magical energy. The previously mentioned phenomenons are commonly sang and talked as folktales amongst the folklore.

* FERN DESCRIPTION / *Matteuccia struthiopteris* (*Struthiopteris filicastrum*), Ostrich fern. This fern is obviously not as poisonous as other ferns. Rhizome of this fern is short, erect and with stolons. Leaves are fronds which do not have sporangiums and are -150 cm tall, erect and form a funnel-like bunch (harvests water). These sterile fronds taper abruptly towards the top, and very gradually towards the base. Ribs are extremely short and leafblades are 1-pinnate-pinnatifid. The sporangiums are located in erect sporophylls of separate fertile fronds, which are dense and rigid, first green and maturing to dark brown. In the springtime the young shoots which have not yet opened their leaves are utilized for food after boiling in brine (salty water) for 10-15 minutes. This fern thrives in fertile edges of small streams, fern-groves, wet groves, flood plains and is also grown as an ornamental plant in gardens.