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The Etymology of *Strawberry*

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Although the more conservative and cautious of modern lexicographical works admit of no sure etymology for *strawberry*, a number of popular explanations are current for a term long thought unrepresented in other western European languages: 1) the name refers to the *straw* mulch put under plants to improve drainage and prevent the fruit from rotting; 2) strawberries grow chiefly in grassy places and in hay fields; 3) the yellow achenes or ovaries present on the “fruit” are *straw*-colored; 4) the extension of runners gives the impression of a plant *strewn* along the ground or propagating itself thereby; 5) the current form is derived from an earlier **strayberry*.¹

Two little observed basic facts in the histories of this name and of strawberries and human culture are 1) that the English word is attested from the Old English period and 2) that the strawberry as is commonly known, *fragaria x ananassa* or Garden Strawberry, is a cultivar dating from only the eighteenth century.² In short, the Old English name would have referred to the Woodland Strawberry, *fragaria vesca* (also known as the Wild, European, or Alpine strawberry). Modern cultivation techniques such as mulching with straw are unlikely to have been practiced in the medieval period, always assuming that some plants were transferred from the wild to gardens. The relative size and weight of the wild berries, entailing that they were unlikely to be in contact with the earth, would also make straw superfluous. Since the achenes of *fragaria vesca* are less prominent than on the domesticated variety and can hardly be qualified as

¹ Anatoly Liberman (2005, p. 81), the most recent scholar to have reviewed this evidence and earlier studies, favors the equation *strawberry* = *grassberry*. This explanation was first advanced by Harold H. Bender (1934). Ernest Weekley, in *An Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (1921), sees an origin in the straw used to cover plants or in the straw-colored achenes. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2000) suggests either the straw-colored achenes or the runners, while *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (1969) refers only to an uncertain origin. Carl S. R. Collin (1938) noted the presence of *stråbår* in some Swedish dialects, although this may reflect the common practice of collecting ripened wild strawberries (*smultron*) on straws.

² The earliest instance is found in the vocabulary traditionally attributed to Ælfric; *Anglo-Saxon and Old English Vocabularies* (1884), p. 136, 14. The berry name has remained in continuous use in English, unaffected by Anglo-Norman French. See *Middle English Dictionary* (1952-2001), s.v. *strauberie*. For the modern cultivar, see Clarke and Converse.

“straw-colored”, this explanation of the name is similarly invalidated. Grassy places or hay fields are emphatically not common habitats. Lastly, *fragaria vesca* rarely produces runners, instead forming multiple crowns in a cluster. The purported link with English *strew*, based on the phenomenon of runners “scattering” the plant, is then also to be discounted in explaining the name.³

Strēawbergan and related forms are well attested in Old English, with more than twenty instances.⁴ The early Germanic languages, with which the Old English word might be most aptly compared, stress the configuration of the plant and its proximity to the soil: Old Saxon *erthberi* ‘earth-berry’, Old High German *ertberi*, Old Swedish *iordhbær*. Yet, in Old English, the comparable *eorðbergan* is found only a single time. Since at least the possibility of an Old English form loaned from, or calqued by the Anglo-Saxons on, a Late British (or Brittonic) form should be entertained, it will be prudent to note attested Celtic forms. Old Irish *sub* references the sweetness of the berries, as do Welsh *mefusen* (ultimately traceable to *mél* ‘honey’), *syfien*, and Breton *sivenn*. These forms are all at appreciable distance from Old English *strēawbergan*. Nor can English *strawberry* be referred to Latin *fragum*, this too a word that has not been successfully etymologized.

Another approach, if we were to stay momentarily with the notion of “strewn berry”, is to consider the actual means of propagation of the Woodland Strawberry. Its usual habitat is trails and roadsides, embankments, hillsides, stone and gravel-laid paths and roads, meadows, young woodlands, sparse forest, woodland edges and clearings. With such a distribution, one might say that *fragaria vesca*, even if wild, was almost destined to come to human attention. As noted above, the plant is not primarily propagated by the formation of runners. Ripened berries are, however, consumed by a variety of animals and birds, and the achenes are then spread far from the original plant. This accounts for the presence of wild strawberry plants even in locations where they do not receive sufficient light to form fruit. Although propagation through consumption by animals and birds is not exclusive to the strawberry, this would seem to offer a more justified connection with *strew* than the non-existent runners.

Old English *strewian*, *strewian* ‘to strew’ has a short vowel/diphthong, while that of *strēa(w)* is long. Furthermore, *strēawbergan* is the clearly dominant form in Old English.⁵ It would seem incontrovertible that the *straw-* of *strawberry* does indeed refer primarily to straw and not to strewing. Yet the word *straw* itself deserves closer scrutiny.

³ See “*Fragaria vesca* L”.

⁴ *Dictionary of Old English, Old English Corpus* (1998), s.vv. *streaberige*, *streawberige*, *streowberige*, *streuberige*.

⁵ A. Campbell (1959), p. 328, n. 10.

Old English *strēaw* has a host of Germanic cognates. The archaic signification of Common Germanic **strawa*, **strawam* was ‘that (to be) strewn’, as floor covering, litter, bedding, etc.⁶ The later designation of the dried stalks of cereals as *straw* represents a transfer from a manner of use to the dried organic byproduct so used.

The most plausible origin for *strawberry* in its earliest reference to the Woodland Strawberry is as a name for plants growing at ground level (like straw spread as litter) irregularly distributed as the result of the spread of achenes by birds and animals--two interrelated senses of being strewn.⁷ So reading the initial element of the compound then returns English *strawberry* to the Germanic fold as a variant on the ‘earth-berry’ designation.

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⁶ *Deutsches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (1995), s.v. *strawa*.

⁷ This development was proposed by Leonard Bloomfield (1933, pp. 433–434), who did not, however, recognize its exclusive relevance to the Woodland Strawberry.

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