

*Agrostemma githago*

[Synonyms : *Githago segetum*, *Lychnis githago*]

**CORNCOCKLE** is an invasive annual or biennial. Probably native to the Mediterranean it has pale streaked, purplish-pink (occasionally white) scentless flowers.

It is also known as *Agrostemma*, *Åkerklätt* (Swedish), *Aurankukka* (Finnish), *Bastard nigella*, *Bolderik* (Dutch), *Bulwg yr Ýd* (Welsh), *Cat's ears*, *Cockel*, *Cockerel*, *Cockleford*, *Cockles*, *Cokeweed*, *Common corn cockle*, *Corn champion*, *Cornflower*, *Corn mullein*, *Corn pink*, *Corn rose*, *Couronne des blés* (French), *Crown of the field*, *Darnel*, *Gith*, *Githage*, *Gye*, *Hardheads*, *Joy of love*, *Kiss-me-quick*, *Klätt* (Swedish), *Kornrade* (German), *Koukol polni* (Czech), *Kúkol' pol'ny'* (Slovak), *Licheta*, *Little and pretty*, *Lolium*, *Lychnis*, *Mullein pink*, *Néle* (Channel Islander-Guernsey, and Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Nielle des blés* (French), *Nielle des prés* (French), *Nigella*, *Old maid's pink*, *Papple Pawple*, *Pink*, *Popille*, *Popple*, *Poppy*, *Pseudo-melanthium*, *Puck needles*, *Purple cockle*, *Ray*, *Red champion*, *Robin hood*, *Rooi Koringblom* (Afrikaans), *Rose champion*, *Rose of heaven*, *Tare*, *Woolly pink*, and *Zizany*; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of duration, gentility, and 'peerless and proud'.

The flowers are particularly attractive to butterflies.

Warning – the whole plant, especially the seeds, is poisonous. It can cause lassitude, yawning, weight loss, gastroenteritis, diarrhoea, headache, vomiting, breakdown of red blood cells, vertigo, convulsions, coma and death. It is also poisonous for animals eg. livestock that have eaten wheat (*Triticum*) contaminated with the seeds, and can cause severe gastrointestinal inflammation and in the past death.

In Britain the corncockle is considered endangered in the wild.

*Githago* is the Latin name for this species.

Today the western world has little good to say about the corncockle. Yet in Roman times the flowers must have been popular and highly regarded as they were wound into coronets which were presented to guests at games and feasts.

The flowers were once a familiar sight in cereal fields in Europe. In some European countries (ironically in view of its disastrously poisonous properties) the flowers were woven into garlands which were worn as protective amulets against poisoning – a quality not attributed to the plant in earlier times.

Although the young leaves have been used as a vegetable in times of hardship, the seeds have been the cause of poisoning for both humans and animals, generally for humans when it has entered the food chain. At one time in the wheat- (*Triticum*) growing regions of North America it cost farmers there several million dollars a year in valueless crops. In areas of the world devoid of modern agricultural practices and the use of weedkillers, the perils posed by the corncockle's seeds continue. In such areas the seed gets threshed out with the harvested cereal grains and then will be ground with them into flour, and will then contaminate animal feed or be sown with future crops.

During past famines the young leaves have been pickled with bacon.

Medicinally, herbalists used to recommend a decoction for treating jaundice and fluid retention.

Today corncockle is used in homoeopathic medicine.