

Alkanna lehmannii

[Synonyms : *Alkanna tinctoria*, *Alkanna tuberculata*, *Anchusa tinctoria*]

ALKANET is a biennial or perennial. Found in central and south-eastern Europe it has small purplish-blue flowers.

It is also known as Alkanna (English, German), Alkanna root, *Alkanne* (German), Anchusa, Bugloss, Dyer's alkanet, Dyer's bugloss, *Färberalkanne* (German), Orchanet, and Spanish bugloss.

Alkanet is subject to preservation orders in some countries.

Lehmannii commemorates a German natural historian and physicist, Johann Georg Christian Lehmann (1792-1860) who was not only a professor in his chosen subjects but was also much involved in the establishment of the botanic garden in Hamburg which he directed for a time. He is recorded as having been an authority particularly on the *Potentilla* genus and cycads. Among his publications authorities note *Monographia Generis Potentillarum* and *Delectus Seminum quae in Horto Hamburgensium Botanico e Collectioni Anni 1830-1840 & 1849-1852 & 1849-1852*.

Of the several plants now named Alkanet this was probably the first to be so called. It means 'little alcanna' from the Spanish *alcanna* which in turn is believed to have come from an Arabic word for 'the dye' *al-hinnā*. The name Anchusa is derived from a Greek word for paint *anchousa* because of the plant's deep reddish-brown dye (not to be confused with that obtained from the leaves of *Lawsonia inermis* which is known as 'henna') obtainable from its roots. It was used as a cosmetic by the ladies of ancient Greece and was one of the important trade items of the period – and later came to be used as colouring by perfumers and pharmacists in western Europe.

For centuries alkanet was imported by France, Germany and Spain as a pharmaceutical and cosmetic dye, and was also used by victuallers. John Parkinson (1567-1650) a London herbalist, wrote what was and is still considered by authorities to be the most comprehensive English book of the period on medicinal plants. He recorded that alkanet was an ingredient in an ointment used by French ladies of the day to colour their faces – colour that apparently did not last long. The plant has also been used to detect fats (a red colour is released in oils and waxes) but has now been superseded by an alternative.

Alkanet's roots were employed in the past for staining wood to make it look like rosewood or mahogany. The roots were immersed in linseed oil to darken it before it was applied as an initial protective coating on various wood surfaces eg. mahogany (*Swietenia mahagoni*), oak (*Quercus*), walnut (*Juglans regia*).

Today commercially the roots are sometimes used as a red colouring agent on cotton and silk as well as in fats, ice cream, sausage skins and other foods, in liqueurs (including inferior port), and in pharmaceutical oils and lip salves. This has also been and sometimes still is the source of the red colouring in chemist's shop display bottles and in thermometer fluids.

Medicinally, alkanet is used in some homoeopathic treatments.