

Allium ampeloprasum var. *porrum*

[Synonyms : *Allium porrum*, *Porrum commune*, *Porrum sativum*]

LEEK is a bulbous perennial. From Europe (possibly the Mediterranean) it has pink to whitish flowers.

It is also known as *Ahlo francês* (Portuguese), *Ahlo porro* (Portuguese), *Ajo porro* (Spanish), *Aschlauch* (German), *Bawang pereh* (Sundanese), *Bawang prei* (Malaysian), *Bawang sayuran* (Indonesian, Javanese), *Breitlauch* (German), *Čapljan* (Serbian), *Čapljani luk* (Serbian), Cultivated leek, *Czosnek por* (Polish), English leek, European leek, *Fleischlauch* (German), *Gandana* (Urdu), Garden leek, *Gartenlauch* (German), *Gemüse-Lauch* (German), *Glavati purić* (Croatian), *Jiu cong* (Chinese), *Khtüm khchâl* (Khmer), *Krathiam ton* (Thai), *Kurrāth* (Arabic), *Lauch* (German), *Lok* (Slovenian), *Luk* (Croatian, Serbian), *Luk-por* (Croatian), *Luk porei* (Russian), *Luk purić* (Croatian), *Naljutka* (Croatian), *Nira negi* (Japanese), *Ou zhou cong* (Chinese), *Paru* (Bengali), *Pèènz fàlangx* (Laotian), *Perati luk* (Croatian), *Pirasa* (Turkish), *Poa-rô hành* (Vietnamese), *Poireau* (French), *Poljski češnjak* (Croatian), Poor man's asparagus, *Por* (Polish, Serbian, Slovenian), *Poreo* (Esperanto), *Porić* (Croatian), *Porik* (Serbian), *Pori luk* (Bosnian, Croatian), *Porjak* (Croatian), *Porluk* (Croatian), *Porro* (Creole), *Porreau* (French), *Porree* (German), *Porree Lauch* (German), *Porro* (Italian), *Porro hortense* (Portuguese), *Pór zahradní* (Czech), *Pouorraie* (Channel Islander-Guernsey, and Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Pras* (Serbian), *Prasa* (Bosnian), *Prasji luk* (Serbian), *Prasluk* (Croatian), *Praso* (Greek), *Praz* (Bulgarian, Serbian), *Praziluk* (Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian), *Prazluk* (Croatian), *Prdeći žbun* (Croatian), *Prei* (Dutch), *Puerro* (Spanish), *Purić* (Croatian), *Purić luk* (Croatian), *Purjak* (Croatian), *Purjan* (Serbian), *Purjo* (Finnish, Swedish), *Purjolök* (Swedish), *Purjosipuli* (Finnish), *Riiki* (Japanese), *Seiyou negi* (Japanese), *Sibuyas bisaya* (Visayan), *Spanischer Lauch* (German), *Suppen-Lauch* (German), *Tòi tây* (Vietnamese), *Winterlauch* (German), Winter leek, *Xi yang cong* (Chinese), and *Zeleni luk* (Serbian); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of liveliness.

Ampeloprasum is made up of Greek *ampelos* (vine) and *prason* (leek) components meaning 'a wild leek partial to vineyards'. *Porrum* is Latin (leek) and it has been suggested that it is derived from Celtic *pori* (to eat).

The common name Leek is derived from the original Anglo-Saxon name for the plant *leac*. Used as a source of food for thousands of years archaeologists have shown that Ur-Nammu (around 2100 BC) grew them. About a thousand years later according to the Book of Numbers in the *Bible* the leek was one of the vegetables yearned after by the Hebrews when they were moving through the Sinai desert in about 1200 BC. It was also a familiar crop for the ancient Egyptians for whom it was a sacred symbol (and some authorities say it was leeks not garlic (*Allium sativum*) or onion (*Allium cepa*) or garden parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*) which formed part of the labourers' diet when on the pyramids built for Pharaoh Cheops (25th Century BC)). [Some Egyptologists today have suggested that records about this are actually referring to offerings made to Egyptian deities.] Both the ancient Greeks and the Romans enjoyed leeks. [Nero, the Roman Emperor (37-68) nicknamed 'the Porrophage' (the Latin for leek is *porrum*) is said to have eaten leeks in

great quantities because he was convinced that they would help to improve the quality of his voice for making speeches.] Some authorities claim it was the Romans who introduced the leek to Britain. Other authorities subscribe to 1562 for the year of the leek's arrival in the British Isles – which if correct could undermine mooted origins for one of the Welsh national emblems.

For soldiers for many centuries the leek represented safety and victory. For farmers leeks were the customary contribution to the communal feast held to acknowledge the mutual assistance given by the village/community with the seasonal ploughing.

In the 6th or 7th Century when going into battle with Saxon invaders it is alleged that the Welsh forces were directed to wear a leek in their caps by their patron saint, St. David (died 601 or 589), as a means of identification. Afterwards the victory was commemorated by making the leek the national emblem of Wales and it is now a traditional adornment on St. David's Day (1st March). It should be said that this same story is also told for the Battle of Crécy (1346) as well as that of Poitiers ten years later, as Welsh soldiers fought in both conflicts but no known record of the emblem's appearance at them exists. Some authorities also note that leek's association with the Welsh is probably even longer than these stories indicate as everyone taking part in the ploughing festival each Spring gave a leek to be added to the stew eaten by all afterwards (an alternative version of recognition of seasonal ploughing assistance).

One superstitious practice connected with the leek was said to enable a young girl to see a vision of her future husband. At Hallowe'en (31st October) in order to receive this 'sight' she had to walk backwards into a garden and place a knife among the leeks.

The leek appears in *The Child of Bristowe*, written by the English poet, Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1345-1400)

The beste song that ever was made
Ys not worth a leky's blade,
But men will tend ther tille.

Two centuries later his compatriot, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) mentions the leek in a couple of his plays including the following from *Henry V*

Tell him, I'll knock his leek about his pate,
Upon Saint Davy's day.

For three centuries from the 16th the leek lost popularity in England certainly to the point where it disappeared. Some authorities put this down not only to a widespread conviction that leeks would encourage bad breath but also to the likelihood that they had been inadequately cleaned (thus gritty to eat) and had been over-boiled (thus unpalatable).

From about the mid-1880s gardeners in northern England have held exhibitions and competitions for finding the heaviest or largest leek (a more popular candidate than the onion, *Allium cepa*). The many societies established for this purpose are enthusiastically supported to this day and details of their activities are reported in the local press. One such in 1990 noted that the top trophy at a particular Show had been awarded for a leek which measured 145.1 cu. ins.

Flies are said to be deterred if windows are washed with a leek infusion.

In North America where they were introduced it is understood that the Choctaw Indians were cultivating leeks for food by 1775.

Medicinally the leek, baked was believed to be a good remedy for the effects of eating too many mushrooms, and boiled it was used to ease piles. In India the bulb has provided a treatment for boils.

It is the birthday flower for 9th February.