

Allium cernuum

[Synonyms : *Allium allegheniense*, *Allium cernum*, *Allium oxyphilum*, *Allium recurvatum*]

LADY'S LEEK is a bulbous perennial. Native to North America it has rosy purple to pinkish-white flowers with long yellowish-pink stamens.

It is also known as Blue-flowered allium, Chicago, Garlic, Leek, Nodding onion, Nodding pink onion, Nodding wild onion, *Nuokkulaukka* (Finnish), Pink garlic, Summer wild onion, Wild onion, and Wild onion of North America.

The flowers are pollinated by butterflies and bees.

Warning – inhalation of the plant's smell by cattle (let alone them eating it) has been shown to be sufficient to contaminate dairy products.

Its flowers can be confused with those of another native wild hyacinth (*Brodiaea douglasii*).

Cernuum is Latin (face toward the ground, falling headlong) meaning 'drooping or nodding'.

Locally in North America the bulbs (with their very strong taste) have been used as a flavouring by many North American Indian tribes (including the Mescalero, Cree, Makah, Chippewa, Shuswap, Kutenai, Thompson, Haisla, Isleta, Hoh, Salish, Oweekeno, Nitinaht, Apache, Bella Coola, Navajo, Cherokee, Blackfoot, Hanaksiala, Klallam, Quileute, Okanagan-Colville, Chiricahua, Keresan, Quinault, Hopi, Flathead and Kwakiutl) particularly in soups, as a vegetable eaten raw or cooked and occasionally they have been pickled too. They were also stored by the Navajo, Thompson, Okanagan-Colville and Isleta tribes for later use and have provided famine food.

Lady's leek appears to have close links with Chicago in the northern United States. Apparently in the Summer of 1878 (48 years after it was first settled) the prairies around the town are said to have been a sea of pink flowers when lady's leek blossomed. The name Chicago is American Indian and said by some to mean 'powerful' and others 'wild onion' or 'skunk'.

Both the Makah and the Quinault Indians used lady's leek to treat pleurisy, while the Isleta and Kwakiutl tribes applied poultices of the bulb to external sores or swellings. For the Cherokee the juice provided a remedy for colds, sore throats and fluid retention, as well as children's croup.

At various stages in its life cycle lady's leek is enjoyed by bears, squirrels, elk and deer. The Shuswap Indians led their sheep and cattle to areas of lady's leek for forage.

Some authorities believe that it was introduced to Britain in about 1800.