

Althaea officinalis

[Synonyms : *Althaea kragujevacensis*, *Althaea taurinensis*]

MARSH-MALLOW is a perennial. Native to temperate parts of northern Asia, western Asia, to Asia Minor, to Australia and Europe (including Britain), it has reddish-purple to dark violet centred, pink or white flowers with many stamens.

It is also known as *Ajbiš* (Czech), *Altearot* (Swedish), *Alteia* (Portuguese), *Alteo oficina* (Esperanto), *Althaea* (French), *Althea*, *Althee* (German), *Altheewurzel* (German), *Apoteksaltea* (Swedish), *Bismalva* (Italian), *Cheeses*, *Common marshmallow*, *Echter Eibisch* (German), *Eibisch* (German), *English mallow*, *Guimaube* (French), *Guimaube officinale* (French), *Gul-khairi* (Hindi), *Heemst* (Dutch), *Heilwurzel* (German), *Hocys y Morfa* (Welsh), *Ibiš* (Czech), *Ibišek* (Czech), *Ibiš lekárský* (Slovak), *Joseph's staff*, *Läkemalva* (Swedish), *Mallards*, *Mallow*, *Malvaisco* (Portuguese), *Malvavisco* (Spanish), *Marsh mallice*, *Mauls*, *Mauve*, *Mesh-mellice*, *Mortification plant*, *Mortification root*, *Proskurnik lékárský* (Czech), *Římský sléz* (Czech), *Rohtosalkoruuusu* (Finnish), *Samtpappel* (German), *Schleimwurzel* (German), *Schloss tea*, *Simaitutti* (Tamil), *Slézová růže* (Czech), *Stockmalve* (German), *Sweatweed*, *Sweet weed*, *White mallow*, *Wimote*, and *Wymote*; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of bachelorhood, beneficence, consent, and consumed by love.

The flowers are pollinated by bees.

Officinalis means 'of the shop (usually the apothecary's or herbalist's)'. Certain plants used for medicinal purposes, whether of actual or legendary value, were kept readily available and acquired this name.

Marsh-mallow was eaten by the ancient Egyptians, the Syrians, the ancient Greeks and the Romans, the latter enjoying it as a vegetable delicacy. Then in the 9th Century Charlemagne (747-814) who was king of the Franks and Christian emperor of the West, encouraged its cultivation in Europe particularly by the monasteries. The roots, boiled and then fried, have been a source of food in times of hardship in succeeding centuries. Today in some countries the boiled root is fried in butter, and is also used to make a tea. The spring tops can be eaten raw in salads. Commercially the powdered root is used by the confectionery industry and, while the the food industry employs extracts to flavour puddings and other dishes, the drinks industry uses them as a flavouring.

It is said that it was the Romans who introduced marsh-mallow to England. In this Country in the past the innocence of anyone accused of a crime was determined by the results of a trial by ordeal (unless they were ill or looked fragile). In church during Mass the alleged criminal had to grasp a red-hot iron and the innocence was considered proven if the skin was not burnt. As only the clergy were permitted to examine the victim's hands the opportunity presented itself for friends to cover his hands surreptitiously with a mixture of marsh-mallow, common fleabane (*Pulicaria dysenterica*) and egg white that would protect the skin from the fierce heat.

Fibres from stems and roots were once used to make paper.

The confection 'marshmallow' commercially made today in the West bears no relation to the original recipe, apart from the name and the use of sugar. Marshmallow used to be a soothing sweet paste known in France as *pâté de guimaube*. This was made from the

gelatinous mixture obtained from powdered marsh-mallow root, which thickens in water and was heated with sugar. The paste was taken medicinally to ease coughs and hoarseness.

The root is a commercial ingredient in some eye lotions and hand creams. It has also been used by the toiletry industry in mouthwash preparations.

Medicinally, the plant has been used for centuries by both the ancient Greeks and the Romans, and by the Arabs as well. The latter were particularly known for using the leaves in poultices for healing inflammation.

Marsh-mallow's soothing qualities have long been respected in folk medicine and have not only been employed in easing external inflammation (especially on tender facial skin) but, by using decoctions of the root, internal inflammation as well eg. ulcers. Herbalists also recommended marsh-mallow in the treatment of respiratory disorders, including coughs, catarrh, bronchitis and whooping cough. It has also been used as a binding agent in the manufacture of pills and in proprietary medicines.

It is the birthday flower for 5th February.