

*Anthoxanthum nitens*

[Synonyms : *Avena odorata*, *Dimesia fragrans*, *Hierochloa fragrans*, *Hierochloe arctica*, *Hierochloe australis*, *Hierochloe borealis*, *Hierochloe fragrans*, *Hierochloe nashii*, *Hierochloe odorata*, *Hierochloe odorata* var. *fragrans*, *Hierochloe odorata* var. *fragrans* forma *eamesii*, *Holcus borealis*, *Holcus fragrans*, *Holcus odoratus*, *Savastana nashii*, *Savastana odorata*, *Savastana odorata* var. *fragrans*, *Torresia nashii*, *Torresia odorata*]

**HOLY-GRASS** is a sometimes invasive grass. Native to the temperate northern hemisphere it has chestnut brown flower spikelets.

It is also known as Buffalo grass, Indian grass, *Kataaru* (Pawnee North American Indian), *Lännenmaarianheinä* (Finnish), *Manuska* (Winnebago North American Indian), *Pezhezonsta* (Omaha and Ponca North American Indian), Sacred grass, Seneca grass, Sweet grass, *Tomkovice vonná* (Czech), Vanilla grass, *Wachanga* (Dakota North American Indian), and Zubrovka.

This grass is a protected plant in Northern Ireland under the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. It is also considered to be threatened in the wild in Britain.

*Nitens* is Latin (shining, bright, glittering).

The fragrant grass used to be strewn before church doors during some Christian festivals in Europe and from this came the name Holy-grass.

For many North American Indian tribes holy-grass was just that – according to records especially so for the Blackfoot Indians. It was burnt as incense during various ceremonies, including the Peyote rituals performed by the Kiowa tribe, and during Blackfoot daily prayers. The smoke from the burning grass purified the Sioux, Blackfoot and Cheyenne Sundance dancers, and the Cheyenne tribe's ceremonial trappings – and in addition to purification the Montana Indian tribe believed it offered spiritual protection. Some of the Dakota Indians burned it both as an offering and as an agent that could bring guardian spirits. The Cheyenne painted it on their pipes for both the Sacred Arrow and Sundance rituals, and braided grass was used by the Blackfoot to adorn their ceremonial headdresses and ritual staffs. During ceremonies the leaves were also smoked with tobacco by Blackfoot and Dakota Indians. Another ritual reported by authorities who suggest that it could be reminiscent of ancient European purification practices – women in the Blackfoot tribe were bathed in grass water before and after childbirth.

Holy-grass incense provided the Flathead Indians with an insect repellent, and the leaves were also used to give a body perfume for the Okanagan-Colville, Thompson, Blackfoot, Dakota, Menominee, Montana Indian and Kiowa tribes. The plant was made into a hair wash or tonic by the Gros Ventre, Blackfoot and Thompson Indians, and it was used as a hair decoration by Flathead and Blackfoot women. It was also laid between clothing by the Okanagan-Colville and Montana Indian tribes so that it could impart its fragrance, and the Blackfoot not only added the grass to ochre but also laid it in saddle packs to make them smell pleasant. This grass was woven into mats by the Micmac and Kiowa Indians, and the latter also used it to stuff pillows and mattresses. For the Menominee tribe the leaves provided sewing material. The Iroquois, Malecite, Menominee and Micmac tribes all used the slightly dried stems for basketry, and authorities have also

noted that young children in the Thompson tribe played with the grass which they found easy to braid.

Holy grass did not escape superstitious connotations. It was burnt in Cheyenne homes as the incense was believed to give protection from thunder and lightning and repel witchcraft.

The plant seems to have had a little use in veterinary medicine as records show that the Blackfoot tribe, at least, used the leaves to treat saddles sores on their horses.

For several tribes holy-grass was a source of medicine. The Flathead North American Indians used it to treat pain and fever, and they and the Blackfoot also chose it for colds. In addition the Blackfoot used it for coughs, sore throats, eye problems, skin disorders and venereal diseases.

American settlers spread the flower heads between linen and in drawers, as well as using them as stuffing in sachets and pillows. In North America today the sweet-smelling grass is still woven into table mats and baskets.

While in Europe (particularly Prussia where it was dedicated to the Virgin Mary) during the medieval period almost to the present day holy-grass has been strewn at church doors (especially on saints' days) so that the passage of worshippers' footsteps scented the air – a characteristic fragrance that could last for months. Folklore also held that it could encourage sleep and bunches of it used to be hung in the bedroom.

Holy-grass has been used in Poland to flavour vodka.