

Aristolochia clematitis

BIRTHWORT is a climbing, slightly twining perennial. Native to central and southern Europe it has unpleasant smelling honeysuckle-like, dull yellowish-green flowers.

It is also known as *Afal Daeur* (Welsh), *Aristolochie clématite* (French), Aristolochia root, Birchwort, Bitter root, *Hålröt* (Swedish), Heartwort, *Osterluzei* (German), *Piippuruoho* (Finnish), *Pipranka* (Swedish), Stinking plant, and Upright birthwort.

Warning – birthwort can cause kidney damage and should only be used internally under the supervision of a qualified practitioner.

In Britain this introduced species is considered to be endangered in the wild.

Clematitis is derived from the genus name *Clematis* meaning ‘clematis-like (*Clematis* genus)’.

Its common name Birthwort was given by William Turner (c.1510-1568) the English clergyman, physician and botanist.

It was familiar medicinally both to the ancient Greeks and to the Romans. The 1st Century physician, Dioscorides, used it as a cure for snake bite symptoms and his Roman peer, Pliny the Elder (23-79) believed in its cleaning qualities for teeth.

This was one of the plants that attracted attention in Europe when there was a revival of blind faith in the principles underlying the Doctrine of Signatures promoted there in the 16th Century by a German alchemist, physician and philosopher, the self-styled Paracelsus (1493-1541). According to this dogma the flower’s foetal shape provided a God-given sign that the plant should be used for childbirth.

Medicinally, the ancient Egyptians used birthwort in particular in the treatment of snake bites, as well as for wounds and bruises. Since then it has also formed part of remedies for insomnia, rheumatism and gout (and the stem juice was used to induce childbirth).

Birthwort is rarely chosen today and has not attracted much research although it is used in homoeopathic treatments and is also an ingredient in some proprietary medicines.