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Borago officinalis

BORAGE is an annual (sometimes biennial). Native to Europe and the Mediterranean it has small blue flowers.

It is also known as *Abū āraq* (Arabic), Bee bread, Bee plant, *Bernagie* (Dutch), *Borag* (Swedish), *Boraga* (Spanish), *Borago oficina* (Esperanto), *Borák lekársky* (Slovak), *Boretsch* (German), *Borrachine* (Italian), *Borrágófű* (Hungarian), *Borrana* (Italian), *Borretsch* (German), *Bouarâge* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Bouôrrage* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Bourrache* (French), *Bourreche* (French), *Brutnák lékařský* (Czech), Bugloss, Borage, Burrage, Common borage, Common bugloss, Cool tankard, *Einjähriger Boretsch* (German), *Fidloqqom* (Maltese), *Gurken Boretsch* (German), *Gurkenkraut* (German), *Gurkört* (Swedish), Herb of gladness, *Kurkkuyrtti* (Finnish), *Langue de boeuf* (French), *Llawnelys* (Welsh), *Purasruoho* (Finnish), Starflower, *Stofferblomma* (Swedish), *Tafod yr Ych* (Welsh), Talewort, and Tailwort; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of bluntness, courage, and talent.

The flowers attract bees.

Warning – continuous use of borage should be avoided. People susceptible to kidney stones may be advised to avoid the plant (because of the relatively high Vitamin C content). Handling the plant may cause dermatitis.

Officinalis means ‘of the (apothecary’s) shop’. (Certain plants used for medicinal purposes were always kept readily available and acquired this name.)

Its Arabian name *Abū āraq* means ‘father of sweat’ and the Welsh name for borage *Llawnelys* means ‘herb of gladness’.

Borage has long been known for lifting the spirits and engendering courage – which is not so far fetched as modern research indicates that it does work on the adrenal gland to varying degrees. Pliny (23-79) the Roman natural historian called the plant ‘*euphrosinum*’ reflecting the belief that it brought joy and merriment, and English 13th Century writings also mirror this. In England the flower was embroidered on the scarves presented to those leaving for the Crusades and borage was often added to the last stirrup cup drunk before the Crusaders left. As regards stamina, some records have suggested that Oliver Cromwell’s (1599-1658) men only managed to fight for such an extended period during the English Civil War of the 1640s because they ate borage.

Between 1858 and 1870 Charles Dickens (1812-1870) the celebrated English author, gave many public readings of his works and these included some in North America. He is understood to have been particularly partial to a borage punch that was made with the plant’s flowers – so much so that while in North America he is said to have passed on his favourite recipe for this Summer beverage.

In England in the early 19th Century the young tops used to be boiled with vegetables, and the plant used also to be an ingredient in wine and cider-making. The young leaves have been added to salads. In parts of France even today the flowers have been eaten frittered and areas of northern Spain and northern Italy prepare the larger leaves and stalks (the latter sometimes separately) as a vegetable.

The flowers appear in many of the Old Masters, particularly the religious paintings and on the page borders of Books of Hours and of herbals. They also feature in much of the

needlework designs from the Tudor and Stuart periods in Britain (roughly the early 16th to early 18th Centuries).

Like basil (*Ocimum basilicum*), borage is a source of beta-carotene. A diet rich in this is believed by the American Cancer Society to be an aid in reducing the likelihood of succumbing to some forms of cancer. Borage, apart from other constituents (some of which could be harmful) also contains Vitamins A and C although at a slightly lower ratio than that of basil. Apparently its calcium content is relatively high.

In the late 1980s borage seems to have attracted especial attention because, like common evening-primrose (*Oenothera biennis*) and blackcurrant (*Ribes nigrum*), its seeds yield gamma-linoleic acid, a valuable substance with anticoagulant properties that help to reduce the rate at which blood clots. Apparently however there are many problems in growing borage on a commercial scale but authorities suspect that development of seed that will not shatter on maturity (like wild rice, *Zizania aquatica*) could go a long way towards resolving these.

Today Arabs still use borage in veterinary medicine.

In the West the toiletry industry uses the leaves on a commercial scale in bath oils and salts.

Medicinally, borage was once recommended by local herbalists for treating kidney and bladder inflammations, as well as consumption, palpitations of the heart and swooning. And in France herbalists chose it for treating fevers and respiratory disorders. Today, apart from other medicinal qualities, it is realised that the seed oil may be helpful in treating some forms of eczema.