

Bryonia dioica

[Synonyms : *Bryonia acuta*, *Bryonia acuta* var. *sicula*, *Bryonia alba*, *Bryonia cretica*, *Bryonia cretica* subsp. *dioica*, *Bryonia digyna*, *Bryonia sicula*]

WHITE BRYONY is a deciduous perennial climber (generally anticlockwise). Native to the Mediterranean, western Asia, and to Europe, it has dark veined, greenish flowers.

It is also known as Ache, *Aquilonia* (Spanish), *Bloneg y Ddaear* (Welsh), *Briónia-branca* (Portuguese), *Brionia comune* (Italian), Briony, British mandrake, *Bryone dioique* (French), Bryonia, Bryony, Canterbury jacks, *Colubrine* (French), Common bryony, Cow's lick, Cretan bryony, *Dalia beida* (Arabic), Dead creepers, Death warrant, Devil's turnip, Dog's cherries, *Eirin Gwion* (Welsh), Elphamy, English mandrake, *Espárrago de nuez* (Spanish), *Fashara* (Urdu), *Fashira* (Arabic), *Feu ardent* (French), Grapewort, Hedge grape, *Heggerank* (Dutch), *Herbe de feu* (French), Hop, Jack-in-the-hedge, *Kétlaki gönye* (Hungarian), Ladies' seal, Mandragora, Mandrake, Mouse grapes, Murren, *Nabo del diablo* (Spanish), *Navet du diable* (French), *Navet galant* (French), *Norça-branca* (Portuguese), *Nueza* (Spanish), *Nuez Negra* (Spanish), Our Lady's seal, *Parra Zarzalera* (Spanish), *Perestupen dvudomnyi* (Russian), *Piros földitök* (Hungarian), Poisoning berries, *Posed dvoudomý* (Czech), *Przestep dwupienny* (Polish), *Punakoiranköynnös* (Finnish), *Raudgallbær* (Norwegian), *Rave de serpent* (French), Red bryony, Red-berried bryony, Redberry bryony, *Röd hundrova* (Swedish), *Rotbeerige Zaurrübe* (German), *Rotfrüchtige Zaurrübe* (German), Rowberry, Snakeberry, Snake bryony, Tamus, Tetter berries, Tetterbury, *Tvebo galdebær* (Danish), *Uva de Lagarto* (Spanish), *Vigne blanche* (French), *Vigne du diable* (French), *Vina Blanca* (Spanish), Vine, White flowered bryony, Wild cucumber, Wild hops, Wild nep, Wild vine, Wild white vine, Woman drake, Wood vine, and *Zweihäusige Zaurrübe* (German); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of prosperity.

The flowers are pollinated by bees.

Warning – all parts of the plant are poisonous, particularly the roots and berries. It can cause nausea, dehydration, haemorrhaging, cramps, colic, gastroenteritis, abdominal pain, severe diarrhoea and vomiting. The plant's juice can irritate the skin. The plant is poisonous for many animals that normally avoid it (although once tasted apparently they can become addicted to it, especially the roots).

The poisonous roots of white bryony can be confused with those of the non-poisonous American sweet cicely (*Osmorhiza longistylis*), horseradish (*Armoracia rusticana*), turnip (*Brassica rapa*), garden radish (*Raphanus sativus*) and parsnip (*Pastinaca sativa*), and also the poisonous roots of monk's-hood (*Aconitum napellus*), of beaver poison (*Cicuta maculata*), of fool's parsley (*Aethusa cynapium*), of hemlock water-dropwort (*Oenanthe crocata*), of hemlock (*Conium maculatum*) and of pokeweed (*Phytolacca americana*).

Dioica refers to the male and female flowers growing on separate plants ie. dioecious.

For the Romans white bryony held powers of protection and Augustus Caesar (63 BC-14 AD) who founded the Roman Empire, was said to have worn a crown of white bryony as a shield against lightning.

In the Middle Ages in Europe carved bryony roots (which for this purpose had a convenient

forked shape) were sold by con men as mandrake root (*Mandragora officinarum*), particularly to childless women who used it as a fertility charm. The root was believed to be an aphrodisiac particularly for human beings, horses (the female root was said to be taken by men and stallions, and the male root by women and mares) and pigs. The shape was often titivated to enhance the lifelike appearance, and sometimes grass seeds eg. millet (*Panicum miliaceum*), were embedded in the 'head' (when they sprouted, they gave the semblance of 'hair'). Around the Cambridge area English village inns once held bawdy 'Venus nights'. White bryony roots (or less often those of the foreign mandrake) in the shape of the female form were entered in competition to find the most striking female likeness. The winner, which was usually chosen by the landlord's wife, was believed to have exceptional magic qualities, and was hung up until replaced after another night of revelry and competition. The roots that lost were, nevertheless, held to have sufficiently potent magical qualities that would justify hanging them in the pigsty to encourage the sows to have large litters. Then when the talisman had dried and shrivelled it was put in the household purse or money-stocking where its residual forces could be harnessed to improve finances. In the 18th Century herbalists in Europe often displayed shop signs carved out of the root in the shape of human forms. These charms would also be suspended for sale inside the establishment – and could still be purchased even in the 19th Century.

White bryony's poisonous qualities were called upon for keeping vermin out of the grain store. It was pushed down rat-holes.

Veterinary medicine used white bryony to enhance the coats of cattle, and also as a tonic for horses.

Medicinally, European herbalists recommended the plant for easing coughs during pleurisy, and for treating leprosy, fluid retention, female ailments, rheumatism, gangrene and sores. There was also a popular remedy called 'Tincture Bryonia' which was prescribed for various liver and spleen disorders. (Authorities have noted that in France, particularly, some women suffered poisoning when they took white bryony under the unfortunate illusion that this would help to lessen the flow of their milk when weaning their babies on to other foods.) However as it can have a violent purgative effect its use today is rare, except in homoeopathic medicine for which only minuscule quantities are employed.