

Centaurea cyanus

[Synonyms : *Centaurea cyanocephala*, *Centaurea pulchra*, *Centaurea segetalis*, *Centaurea umbrosa*, *Cyanus segetum*, *Jacea segetum*, *Leucacantha cyanus*]

CORNFLOWER is an annual (occasionally biennial). Native to southern and eastern Europe, to Britain and to Asia, it has blue flower heads.

It is also known as *Aciano* (Spanish), *Aldiza* (Spanish), *Azulejo* (Spanish), Bachelor's button, Barbeau (English, French), *Barbeau bleue* (French), *Blågubbar* (Swedish), *Blåklätt* (Swedish), *Blåklint* (Swedish), *Blaue Kornblume* (German), Blaver, Blawort, *Bleuet* (French), *Bliuettes* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Blou Centaurea* (Afrikaans), Blue blaw, Blue blawort, Blueblow, Blue bobs, Bluebonnet, Bluebottle, Bluebow, Blue button, Blue-cap, Blue centaurea, Blue centaur, Blue jack, Blue poppy, Blue sailors, Blue tops, Bobby's buttons, Bottle-of-sorts, Break-your-spectacles, Brooms and brushes, Brushes, Bunk, *Casse-lunettes* (French), *Cchrpa modrá* (Czech), *Cejano* (Esperanto), *Centaurée bleue* (French), *Centaurée bleuet* (French), *Centaurée bluet* (French), Centaur, *Chrpa polní* (Czech), *Ciano* (Italian), Corn-blinks, Corn blue-bottle, Cornbottle, Corn centaur, Corn pinks, *Cramannog yr Yd* (Welsh), Cuckoohood, *Curac na cuig* (Irish Gaelic), Cyani, *Echte Kornblume* (German), *Fidalguinhos* (Portuguese), French pink, Garden cornflower, *Geranitza* (Greek), *Gorman* (Scottish Gaelic), Happy skies, Hawdods, Hurt-sickle, Knobweed, Knotweed, *Korenbloem* (Dutch), *Koringblom* (Afrikaans), *Kornblume* (German), Ladder love, Loggerheads, *Loios-dos-jardins* (Portuguese), Miller's delight, *Nevädza pol'ná* (Slovak), *Penlas yr Yd* (Welsh), Pin-cushion, Ragged ladies, Ragged robin, Ragged sailors, *Ruiskaunokki* (Finnish), *Ruiskukka* (Finnish), St. Barnabas' thistle, Sultan's flower, Thumble, Witch bells, and Witch's thimble; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of delicacy, 'dweller in heavenly places', and refinement.

In Britain the cornflower is considered endangered in the wild.

Cyanus honours the Sicilian water nymph Cyane. (When Persephone was abducted by Hades Cyane accompanied her and heart-broken transformed herself into a dark blue spring.) It was a Greek name for the cornflower and means 'dark blue'.

The flowers used to be a common sight in the cornfields in Europe but this is no longer so because of changing agricultural practices. When the crops were harvested with a sickle, the cornflower gained a reputation for blunting the blade because of their tough stems. This led to its common name, Hurt-sickle.

Experts are certain that the cornflower grew in Britain at least 12,000 years ago. They believe they have identified proof that it flourished in the Country during the severest of the last Ice Age glaciations there. Archaeologists have also found the tiny fruit among grains of corn in excavations of the Swiss Lake villages at Robenhausen in the European Alps. These date back to about 8000 BC, the beginning of the Middle Stone Age. Cornflowers were also found by archaeologists in Tut'ankhamun's tomb at Thebes. He died at only 18 years of age in about 1340 BC and apparently when the flowers were found in the 1920s they had lost little of their colour.

Juice of the flowers was once used to make a blue ink, and artists obtained a pigment by pounding the centre of the flowers in a mortar. The juice can also be used as an

impermanant blue dye for linen. The petals were, and still are, added to pot pourri for their colour, and they were also used to colour perfume. Perhaps a little surprisingly they have also been used as a colouring for wine. The flower has been reluctant to release the secret of its blue colour. Only in 1993, after 50 years' research by chemists in various parts of the world, have Japanese biochemists been able to identify the molecular structure that produces it.

In earlier times young men believed that if a flower carried in the pocket survived, he would be marrying his current sweetheart. There was a more down-to-earth superstition however that was supported by some people. They believed that bread would go mouldy if the cornflower was brought into the house.

Cornflower is a floral emblem of Germany. In England it is also the traditional flower of one or two of the old public schools, Harrow and Haberdashers' Aske's (Girls), as well as the Alleyn Foundation.

One of the plants known before the 16th Century as the ingredient for an effective eyewash for tired eyes, the cornflower was, according to tradition, particularly suitable for blue eyes (greater plantain, *Plantago major*, being the soother for brown eyes).

The toiletry industry uses the flowers today in commercial hair shampoos and rinses, and they are an ingredient for the pharmaceutical industry in eye lotions.

Medicinally, the cornflower was used by herbalists to cure infectious diseases (including plague), fevers and poisoning, and they used its juice to heal wounds. Today the flowers are used occasionally as a tonic and also as a treatment for eye inflammation.