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Centaurium erythraea

[Synonyms : *Centaureon centaurium*, *Centaurium centaurium*, *Centaurium minus*, *Centaurium minus* subsp. *austriacum*, *Centaurium umbellatum*, *Centaurium umbellatum* subsp. *austriacum*, *Erythraea capitata*, *Erythraea centaurium*, *Erythraea lomae*, *Gentiana centaurium*]

COMMON CENTAURY is an annual or biennial. Native to central Europe and north Africa it has pale or rose red flowers.

It is also known as Banwort, *Biondella* (Italian), Birthwort, Bitter herb, Bloodwort, Branching centaury, *Bustl y Ddaear* (Welsh), *Centaurea minore* (Italian), Centaur-pink, Centaury, Centaury gentian, *Centawrija* (Maltese), Centory, Centre of the sun, *Centurée* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), Century, Chironia, *Chlístník* (Czech), Christ's ladder, *Cintorie* (Czech), Drug centaurium, Earth gall, *Echt duizendguldenkruid* (Dutch), *Echtes Tausendguldenkraut* (German), *Eritreo* (Esperanto), *Erythrée petite centaurée* (French), European centaury, Febrifuga, Feltrike, Feverfew, Feverwort, Filwort, *Flockarun* (Swedish), Gall of the earth, Gentian, *Herbe à la fièvre* (French), *Hèrbe d'St Martin* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Hořká bylina* (Czech), Hurdreve, *Kücük kantaryon* (Turkish), *Kyřice* (Czech), Lesser centaury, Mountain flax, *Petite centaurée* (French), Pink centaury, *Quanturian* (Urdu), Red centaury, *Rohtosappi* (Finnish), Sanctuary, Spiked centaury, *Tausendguldenkraut* (German), *Tisícizlaté koření* (Czech), *Zemežluč menší* (Slovak), *Zeměžluč hořká* (Czech), *Zeměžluč lékařská* (Czech), *Zeměžluč menší* (Czech), and *Zeměžluč okolikatá* (Czech); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of delicacy, and felicity.

The flowers open until noon daily in fine weather.

Erythraea is derived from Greek *erythro-* (red) component with reference to the pink colour of the flowers.

Common centaury has properties similar to those of the real gentian (*Gentiana lutea*) and is thus often called Gentian especially in Scotland. The common name Centre of the sun is a local English name (from the county of Worcestershire) and is a corruption of 'centaury'.

Common centaury was believed by the Celts to be a lucky plant. Centuries ago it was one of the 15 magical herbs respected in witchcraft, and was used in exorcisms. In the 10th Century in England the plant was still considered to have some power and was grown widely for this reason.

The plant is a natural meteorologist as it closes with an overcast sky or in damp weather.

Common centaury yields a yellowish-green dye. An infusion of the plant was popular with some European ladies as a hair bleach in the 15th Century although authorities note the results would have been highly unsatisfactory.

The plant has also been used in veterinary medicine.

Today common centaury is used by the drinks industry as a commercial ingredient in vermouth and bitter herb liqueurs.

Medicinally, Nicholas Culpeper (1616-1654) the English physician, attributed a healing and tonic effect to common centaury. One of the Dukes of Portland, who suffered from gout, was believed to have been cured with a remedy which depended upon this plant (together with wall germander, *Teucrium chamaedrys* and yellow bugle, *Ajuga chamaepitys*) and

which came to be known as the 'Duke of Portland's Powder'. Much earlier the Saxons used the plant to treat snake bites and fever, while in later centuries herbalists recommended an infusion of the dried plant as a tonic and digestive aid, and also a treatment for muscular rheumatism. It provided an ingredient in a cure for jaundice, was used to expel worms, and was applied externally to wounds and sores. Today it is a valued remedy for kidney and gallbladder disorders, and it is also prescribed to help stimulate appetite. It is also used in homoeopathic treatments.