

### *Chamerion angustifolium*

[Synonyms : *Chamaenerion angustifolium*, *Chamaenerion angustifolium* f. *album*, *Chamaenerion spicatum*, *Epilobium angustifolium*, *Epilobium angustifolium* var. *leucanthum*, *Epilobium angustifolium* subsp. *macrophyllum*, *Epilobium spicatum*]

**ROSEBAY WILLOWHERB** is a perennial. Native to northern temperate areas it has purplish-pink flowers.

It is also known as *Antonine* (French), Apple-pie, Bay willow, Bay willowherb, Blood vine, Blooming Sally, Blooming willow, Bombweed, *Brudfackla* (Swedish), Burnt weed, Cat's eyes, Codlins and cream, *Duntrav* (Swedish), *Épilobe en épi* (French), *Epilobio a spighe* (Italian), Epilobium, Eyebright, Firetop, Fireweed, Flowering willow, Flowering withy, French saugh, French willow, French willowherb, Great willowherb, *Helyglys Hardd* (Welsh), *Herbe de St. Antoine* (French), Herb wickopy, *Himmelgraes* (Swedish), Indian wickup, Indian wicopy, *Kropp* (Swedish), *Laurier de S. Antoine* (French), *Lauro roseo* (Italian), *Maitohorsma* (Finnish), *Mjölke* (Swedish), *Mjölkört* (Swedish), Moose tongue, Mother die, *Mukaddes defne* (Turkish), *Neriette* (French), *Osier fleuri* (French), Persian willow, Pig weed, Purple fireweed, Purple racket, Purple rocket, *Rallarros* (Swedish), Ranting widow, *Rävrumpa* (Swedish), *Rävsvans* (Swedish), Rosebay, Rosebay willow, Rose-elder, Sally bloom, *Schmalblättriges Weidenröschen* (German), Siberian flax, *Skogsblöss* (Swedish), Slinkweed, Spiked willowherb, Tall willowherb, Tame withy, *Vanlig mjölkört* (Swedish), *Wald-Weidenröschen* (German), *Weiderich* (German), Wickapee, Wickop, Wickup, Wickopy, Wild phlox, Wild snapdragon, *Wilgenroosje* (Dutch), Willowherb, Willowweed, and *Xipree Karamuk* (Russian); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of bravery, celibacy, humanity, and pretension.

One plant can produce as many as 20,000 seeds. The flowers yield pollen and nectar enjoyed by bees, and the silky-haired seeds are distributed by the wind.

*Angustifolium* is derived from Latin *angusti-* (narrow) and *-folia* (leaved) components.

It is quite surprising to learn from records of some of the many diverse uses for the plant (apart from food or medicine) that were discovered by North American Indian tribes. Some of the Cree used the stem fibre as sewing thread, and the Kitasoo are believed to have used it to make fishing nets. Both the Quinault and Skokomish tribes combined the long, silky, white seed hairs with duck feathers for making blankets, and the Klallam mixed the hairs with dog hairs to weave material. For the Blackfoot tribe the flowers provided a waterproofing agent and they rubbed them on their mittens and rawhide thongs. The Tanana Indians used the plant as a mosquito repellent and also burnt it to smoke fish. While the Shuswap seem to have appreciated more aesthetic qualities as it is noted that they arranged the flowers with roses for decoration. In contrast other tribes watched for the plants' flowering as an indicator of the seasons. For the Thompson tribe this meant that the deer were fat enough to be hunted, and for the Cree it was a reminder that moose were fattening before the mating season.

As a food records suggest that most North American tribes, including the Alaskan and Inuktitut Inuits and the Gitksan, Bella Coola, Tanana, Thompson, some of the Okanagan-Colville, the Haisla, Blackfoot and Wet'suet'en Indians viewed it as a vegetable. Youngs shoots (as well as the stems, leaves and roots) were eaten raw or cooked, alone or with other

ingredients. The Alaskan Inuits preserved the stems for Winter food, and they also used the pith as a sweetener for some of their children's dishes. The Klallam Indians boiled the roots to make a drink, and the Saanich used the young leaves for a tea.

The plant was also a source of medicine for many tribes, including the Potawatomi and some of the Algonkin. The Swinomish Indians washed their invalids in a plant decoction. The root (and records suggest less often the leaves, bark or whole plant) seems to have been used by the Bella Coola, Menominee, some of the Cree, the Chippewa and the Thompson Indians for treating various skin disorders such as boils, wounds or swellings. It was used by the Iroquois and Skokomish tribes to treat tuberculosis, while the Abnaki Indians took it for coughs. The Snohomish tribe used the root to ease sore throats and the plant was turned to by some of the Navajo Indians for treating stomach upsets. Some urinary and kidney ailments were treated with it by the Iroquois and they also applied bark poultices to painful parts of the body. Alaskan Inuits took the leaves as a laxative, while the Blackfoot tribe used parts of the plant similarly (including the root) for their babies. Seeds were used in treatments for cancer by the Kwakiutl tribe, and the Blackfoot Indians believed that a part of the plant rubbed on their hands and face would insulate that skin from cold in Winter.

In Britain records show that during the Elizabethan era (1558-1603), John Gerard (1545-1612) the noted English herbalist and barber-surgeon, learnt that rosebay willowherb could be found in Yorkshire. At that time it was not a common plant in the Country and apparently it began to become ever more prevalent there only from about the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. As it will appear rapidly on burnt ground no doubt the bombsites in London, from the 2nd World War, have helped to encourage its establishment in the British capital. (Its prevalence in London must have been striking in the Summer of 1944 as it justified an article in the New York Herald Tribune.)

It is still used today as a tea by some North American Indian and Inuit tribes – and in some parts of Russia where it is known as 'Kapporie tea'. In some countries the young shoots have been prepared and eaten like garden asparagus (*Asparagus officinalis*), and in Russia the plant has been used to make ale (the potency of which has been increased by the addition of the very poisonous Fly Agaric toadstool). Roots have not only provided a vegetable but have been used to make flour too.

The flowers are an important source of nectar for bees and the honey is much sought after. It has a greenish colour, is light and is said to have a very sweet, delicate taste.

Rosebay willowherb can also provide food both for livestock and game, including horses and deer, and the plant is understood to be a particular favourite with grizzly bears. Some of the North American Indian tribes fed their animals on it. The Thompson Indians used the stalks as pig feed, and some of the Tanana cooked the shoots with fish for their dogs.

Today the leaves (and roots) provide commercial ingredients for the cosmetics industry in preparations for delicate skins.

Medicinally, it has been used in North America, particularly for treating intestinal disorders, and elsewhere herbalists have recommended it as a remedy for whooping-cough and asthma. The leaves have also been used to treat external inflammation.

It is the birthday flower for 11<sup>th</sup> August.