

Chelidonium majus

[Synonyms : *Chelidonium grandiflorum*, *Chelidonium majus* var. *grandiflorum*]

GREATER CELANDINE is a biennial or perennial. Native to temperate and subarctic Europe and Asia, it has bright yellow flowers with many greenish-yellow stamens.

It is also known as *Bělmové kořeny* (Czech), Celandine, Celandine poppy, *Celidon* (Czech), *Chélidoine* (French), Chelidonium, Cockfoot, Cocks foot, Common celandine, Devil's milk, *Dilwydd* (Welsh), Elonwort, Felonwort, Garden celandine, Great celandine, *Grosses Schöllkraut* (German), *Hadí mličí* (Czech), *Haxixa tal-felul* (Maltese), *Herbe à l'hirondelle* (French), *Hërbe à véthues* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), Jacob's ladder, *Keltamo* (Finnish), Kenningwort, Killwart, Killwort, *Laštovičník väčší* (Slovak), *Mlič* (Czech), Rock poppy, *Rostopască* (Rumanian), St. John's wort, Saladine, *Schöllkraut* (German), Sightwort, *Skelört* (Swedish), Sollendine, *Svaleurt* (Danish), Swallow-wort, Tetterwort, *Vlašťovičník větší* (Czech), Wartflower, Wart plant, Wartweed, Wart wort, *Warzenkraut* (German), Witch's flower, Wortweed, Wret weed, and Yellow spit; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of withered hope.

The whole plant contains a caustic orange-yellow juice (or latex) that turns red upon exposure to air and has a pungent fetid smell and a persistent acrid bitter-taste.

The flowers are pollinated by bees and flies. The white appendage on the seeds is eaten by ants and, as they collect the seeds for food, they participate in the seeds' distribution.

Warning – the whole plant is poisonous, especially the roots. Symptoms can include breathing difficulties, violent coughing, sleepiness, bright yellow-stained urine, ulcers, vomiting, circulatory disorders, gastroenteritis and kidney damage. It has also caused death in humans. Skin poisoning, irritation, dermatitis and blisters can be caused by handling the crushed plant. The fresh juice will also stain the skin strongly. It should only be used under the supervision of a qualified practitioner. It can be poisonous for animals and poultry, particularly chickens.

The leaves of greater celandine have been confused with those of garden parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*).

This plant, which is viewed by most authorities as the true celandine, bears no relationship to the lesser celandine (*Ranunculus ficaria*) except in the colour of its flowers.

Majus is derived from Latin *maior* (greater) meaning 'greater, bigger or larger'.

Dioscorides, the 1st Century Greek physician, named the plant after the swallow (from the Greek word *khelidon*) because the migration of swallows was supposed to herald its flowering and their departure coincide with the flowers' death. Celandine is said to be a corruption of the Greek word.

Although during the interglacial period the greater celandine is believed to have grown in Britain, since then it has had to be introduced (or re-introduced) and this probably occurred during the medieval period.

A Spanish ambassador at the English Court is held to have compared Elizabeth I's teeth to black pearls. It is said that on an occasion when one of these appallingly bad teeth was causing considerable discomfort the Queen refused to have it removed. However a Court physician recommended that greater celandine juice be dripped into the offending cavity and it is related that the Queen was then able to pull the tooth out easily by herself.

Greater celandine attracted the attention of one of England's famous poets, William Wordsworth (1770-1850). It cannot be disputed that *To the Small Celandine* is 'Hymns in praise ...' of the little flower.

.....
Primroses will have their glory;
Long as there are violets,
They will have a place in story;
There's a flower that shall be mine,
'Tis the little Celandine.

.....
But the thrifty cottager,
Who stirs little out of doors.
Joys to spy thee near her home:
Spring is coming; thou art come!

.....
Thou dost show thy pleasant face
On the moor, and in the wood,
In the lane; there's not a place
Howsoever mean it be,
But 'tis good enough for thee.

.....
Herald of a mighty band,
Of a joyous train ensuing,
Serving at my heart's command,
Tasks that are no tasks renewing,
I will sing, as doth behove,
Hymns in praise of what I love!

In North America the Iroquois Indians used the plant as an ingredient in a medicine reserved for their pigs.

Medicinally, greater celandine was believed traditionally to be able to improve eyesight, and it was also used to remove freckles and loosen teeth. In addition it was relied upon for treating jaundice, liver, lung and gastrointestinal disorders, rheumatism, skin diseases (particularly eczema) and warts. (The orange-yellow colour of the sap led those who subscribed to the tenets of the Doctrine of Signatures, which was particularly fashionable in the 16th Century, to associate the plant with liver diseases generally and jaundice.) In the English county of Suffolk the plant was still being used to treat toothache as recently as the 1930s. At that time in Russia it was also said to be useful in treating cancer. Today it is still valued primarily as a herbal medicine in the West for liver disorders although it is used in proprietary medicines and homoeopathy. The plant has long been part of Chinese medicine and their more recent clinical studies are said to have shown it to be effective in the treatment of both bronchitis and whooping-cough.

It is the birthday flower for 9th October.