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### *Consolida ajacis*

[Synonyms : *Consolida ambigua*, *Delphinium ajacis*, *Delphinium ambiguum*, *Delphinium consolida*, *Delphinium gayanum*]

**LARKSPUR** is an annual. Native to the Mediterranean it has spurred, violet to pink, blue or white flowers.

It is also known as Annual larkspur, Common larkspur, Doubtful knight's spur, Field larkspur, Forking larkspur, Garden larkspur, Knight's spur, Lark's claw, Lousewort, *Minqar-attair* (Arabic), *Ostrožka zahradní* (Czech), *Pedidalwet* (Maltese), *Pi d'alouaette* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Pied-d'alouette* (French), Racket larkspur, Rocket larkspur, *Romersk riddarsporre* (Swedish), Staggerweed, and *Tarhakukonkannus* (Finnish).

Warning – all parts of the plant are poisonous, especially the leaves and the seeds. Initially it can cause a burning sensation on the tongue and stomach and skin, restlessness, slow pulse, inco-ordination and muscular weakness. This is followed by convulsions, diarrhoea, vomiting, abdominal pains and within up to 8 hours death from respiratory or heart failure. In sufficient quantity it is also poisonous for some animals.

*Ajacis* honours the Greek hero Ajax, son of the king of Salamis. Legend tells how he committed suicide when he lost Achilles' armour in competition with Odysseus and it is said that flowers marked with the Greek letters *AI* (Alas) grew up on his grave. The markings on larkspur are meant to resemble these letters.

It seems that the ancient Egyptians were using larkspur about 3,000 years ago to decorate mummies.

No doubt overtones of the familiar 16<sup>th</sup> Century Doctrine of Signatures associated the blue of the flowers with the eyes as a larkspur lotion was once a favourite eye remedy. Even looking at the flowers was considered helpful as scholars were advised to keep them nearby and rest their eyes upon them periodically – and an onlooker was guaranteed a trouble-free year from eye problems if a Midsummer fire had been viewed through a bunch of them.

Records suggest that the North American Cherokee Indians came to know the plant – and despite being aware of its poisonous nature, used it in infusion for treating some heart problems.

Medicinally, herbalists have recommended larkspur juice in the past as a purgative and as a treatment for colic. They also used a tincture of the seeds to destroy lice.