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### *Convallaria majalis*

[Synonyms : *Convallaria keiskei*, *Convallaria keiski* var. *trifolia*, *Convallaria majalis* var. *manshurica*, *Convallaria montana*]

**LILY-OF-THE-VALLEY** is a perennial. Native to Europe it has small waxy, white flowers. It is also known as *Clych Enid* (Welsh), *Convallaria*, *Convall-lily*, *Convally*, *Dangle bells*, *Doitsu suzuran* (Japanese), *European lily of the valley*, *Fairies' bells*, *Fairy ladders*, *Glovewort*, *Inciçiçeği* (Turkish), *Innocents*, *Jacob's ladder*, *Kielo* (Finnish), *Kimigakesō* (Japanese), *Konvalje* (Swedish), *Konvalinka voňavá* (Slovak), *Konvalinka vonná* (Czech), *Ladder to heaven*, *Lady's tears*, *Lelietje der Dalen* (Dutch), *Lilies and valleys*, *Liljekonvalj* (Swedish), *Liljekonvalje* (Swedish), *Lily constancy*, *Lily conval*, *Linen buttons*, *Liriconfancy*, *Little white bells*, *Mai-blume*, *Majfloro* (Esperanto), *Maiglöckchen* (German), *Male lily*, *May bells*, *May blossoms*, *May flower*, *May lily*, *Mudget* (Channel Islander-Guernsey and Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Mugget*, *Mughetto* (Italian), *Muguet* (French), *Muguet de l'isle* (French), *Mugwet*, *Our Lady's tears*, *Pack lily*, *Suzu ran* (Japanese), *White bells*, and *Wood lily*; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of purity, 'return of happiness', and sweetness.

Warning – the whole plant is poisonous (especially for some authorities the flowers) and can only be used by a qualified practitioner. In small amounts it can cause an upset stomach, abdominal pain and irregular heartbeats. In large amounts it can cause clammy skin, wind, vomiting, diarrhoea, mental disturbance, convulsions, coma and death. It is potentially poisonous for animals, (particularly small ones who have greater access to it) and birds.

*Majalis* is derived from Latin *Maius* (May) meaning 'of May' with reference to the time when the flowers bloom.

The common name *Mugget* is an anglicised version of the French name *muguet*.

In Nordic mythology lily-of-the-valley was dedicated to the goddess of the dawn, Ostara. For the Germans the flower brought luck in love and whole towns would go out and gather the flowers in May. The Normandy French had lily-of-the-valley picnics – and in other parts of France such as Rambouillet and Île de France carts were decorated with the flowers.

Lily-of-the-valley also features in the Christian tradition. Christian lore tells how the lily-of-the-valley sprang up at the foot of the Cross out of Mary's tears and that the flower's strong perfume can help man to see a better world. It can also be used as a symbol of Christ's second coming. It is dedicated to Whitsun in the Christian calendar and is used at that time, especially, to dress churches. The flowers are also a traditional part of a bridal bouquet in Christian wedding ceremonies.

The noted English physician, Nicholas Culpeper (1616-1654), reported that lily-of-the-valley could be found growing in untamed abundance on Hampstead Heath in London during his lifetime. Yet it is understood that 200 years later the flowers had dwindled to a handful after trees on the Heath were destroyed.

In Germany well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century a wine was made from the flowers that were mixed with raisins (*Vitis*).

Lily-of-the-valley is the national flower of Finland. In England it features as the prime flower of an annual festival held in Helston in Cornwall, the Furry Dance (or in years gone by the Flora or Faddy). Although a dress rehearsal often takes place on 1<sup>st</sup> May, the festival actually falls on 8<sup>th</sup> May (unless that is a Sunday or Monday market day), the Feast of the Apparition of St. Michael the Archangel – and everyone there wears a bunch of lily-of-the-valley.

Various superstitions surround the flower. You are believed to be courting an early death if, in the English West Country, you plant a bed of lily-of-the-valley. While further east in St. Leonard's Forest, near Horsham in Sussex, the reputed mass of blooms that can be found there is accounted for by another local English legend. It is said that the local patron saint, St. Leonard, defended the community by killing a dragon that had been terrorizing the population. Unfortunately though the saint was mortally wounded and the flowers sprang from wherever his blood fell. Some people believe that bad luck is beckoned if lily-of-the-valley flowers are brought inside the house – and some refuse to wear the blossoms themselves or even, say, a scarf bearing a motif of the flower, let alone accept a handkerchief embroidered with it.

The flowers have attracted the attentions of poets not least among them the Englishman, William Wordsworth (1770-1850) who mused

That shy plant – the lily of the vale,  
That loves the ground, and from the sun withholds  
Her pensive beauty, from the breeze her sweets.

While his younger peer John Keats (1795-1821) wrote

No flower amid the garden fairer grows  
Thou the sweet lily of the lowly vale,  
The queen of flowers.

Lily-of-the-valley was included as an ingredient in love potions.

The leaves yield a green dye.

Herbalists recommended distilled water from the flowers for a range of ailments including gout, apoplexy, loss of speech, eye problems, headaches, sprains and rheumatism – and it was also said to be a 'brain and heart strengthener'. This distillation, which was believed to have been obtained by placing the flower in a covered glass inside an anthill for 1 month, was so highly prized by some people that they stored it in gold or silver containers. Often known as *eau d'or* or *aqua aurea* the liquid also attracted an unusual reputation. If it was smeared on the forehead or the back of the neck it was said to be able to impart common sense. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, during World War I lily-of-the-valley was used (apparently with some success) to counter the effects of trench gas.

The flowers are a commercial ingredient today used by the perfumery industry (one to be found in Jeanne Lanvin's *Arpège*), and the dried ground roots or the dried flowers are used by the tobacco industry in snuff.

Medicinally, the plant is rarely used today outside eastern European countries (apart from its use in homoeopathy.). In those countries however it can still be considered an important drug, one that can be as effective as and safer than foxglove (*Digitalis*) in regulating heart action.

It is the birthday flower for 7<sup>th</sup> September and is associated with the month of May.