

### *Daphne mezereum*

[Synonyms : *Mezerei cortex*, *Mezerei officinarum*]

**MEZEREON** (English, Italian, Spanish) is a deciduous shrub. Native to western Asia, to Europe (including Britain for many authorities) and to Siberia, it has strongly fragrant, rose-violet flowers.

It is also known as *Bliwllys* (Welsh), *Bois gentil* (French), *Bois joli* (French), *Camelea* (Italian), *Camolea*, *Daphne*, *Daphné bois joli* (French), *Daphné mézéréon* (French), *Dwarf bay*, *Dwarf laurel*, *Echter Seidelbast* (German), *Erba cativa* (Italian), *European mezereon*, *Faux garou* (French), *February daphne*, *Flax*, *Flax olive*, *Flowering spurge*, *Gewöhnlicher Seidelbast* (German), *Ghulupa* (Turkish), *Hanlik näsiniin* (Estonian), *Hoja de San Pedro* (Spanish), *Kellerbalz* (German), *Kellerhals* (German), *Lady's laurel*, *Laureola femmina* (Italian), *Laureola gentile* (Italian), *Lauréola hembra* (Spanish), *Lauréole femelle* (French), *Lauréole joli* (French), *Legno gentile* (Italian), *Leño gentil* (Spanish), *Lorbeer-Ziland* (German), *Lykovec jedovatý* (Slovak), *Lýkovec jedovatý* (Czech), *Matacabras* (Spanish), *Matapollo* (Spanish), *Mazaryon agh* (Turkish), *Mazell*, *Mazeryune* (Urdu), *Mecereo* (Spanish), *Mecéreo* (Spanish), *Mecerón* (Spanish), *Mezereo* (Spanish), *Mezereón* (Spanish), *Mezereum*, *Mezereo* (Esperanto), *Mezzell*, *Mezzereo* (Italian), *Näsiä* (Finnish), *Olivareta* (Spanish), *Ou ya rui xiang* (Chinese), *Paradise plant*, *Red berry laurel*, *Sain bois* (French), *Seidelbast* (German), *Spurge daphne*, *Spurge flax*, *Spurge laurel*, *Spurge olive*, *Tibast* (Swedish), *Tintorell*, *Torvisco* (Spanish), *Vanlig tibast* (Swedish), and *Wild pepper*; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of 'desire to please', fame, glory, and 'sweets to the sweet'.

The flowers are pollinated by bumble-bees and butterflies.

Warning - the whole plant (particularly the leaves, fruit and bark) must not be taken internally. Even for external uses the plant should only be used under the supervision of a qualified practitioner. Externally it can cause inflammation and blistering. Internally it can cause oral inflammation and blistering (including swollen tongue and lips), convulsions, bloody diarrhoea, dilated pupils, nausea, kidney damage, shivering, stupor, vomiting, weakness, delirium, collapse and death. It is also poisonous for animals that because it is unpalatable usually avoid it.

Mezereon, growing in the wild, is a protected plant in Britain.

*Mezereum* is for some authorities derived from a Persian name for this species *mazaryum* meaning 'deadly' (the whole plant is very poisonous), and for others it is a corruption of its Latin name *mezereon*.

Some authorities have pondered that the name *Paradise plant* (which is said to come from Somerset in the English West Country) is associated with a practice certainly popular in England in the late 16<sup>th</sup>/early 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries of stocking a park or enclosed area with exotic plants and animals.

It has been known for the dried fruit to be used as pepper (*Piper nigrum*). This has proved fatal. Even extremely small quantities can be lethal and it could be very dangerous to prepare.

In Sweden it is claimed that the small glossy, bright scarlet berries were once used to poison wolves and foxes, yet it is known that birds enjoy them apparently unharmed. Authorities have also noted that snails eat the fruit even before they are ripe – a habit found

eventually to be shared with others. Ornithologists noted that before 1900 greenfinches from Lancashire northwards in Britain had begun to eat the fruit's unripe kernel (after having pecked at the immature green berries and discarded the seedcoat). By 1930 they had recorded this practice from Perth in Scotland to London in the South of England and then by the mid-1950s throughout the whole Island.

The sap from the plant yields a yellow dye, and the fruit have also been used by artists to produce a reddish colour.

It is said that women in both Russia and what is today the Tatar Republic used the berries as a kind of rouge – they rubbed them on their cheeks to redden them.

The plant used also to be employed in veterinary medicine, particularly in Siberia where it was used for treating horses hooves, but this has ceased.

The shrub came to be known to some North American Indian tribes and the Cherokee used the root bark to treat venereal diseases.

Medicinally, it is suggested that in parallel with the popular practice of leeching used in bygone days the dried bark of mezereon (in vinegar) was applied to the skin. This would have caused inflammation and blistering but was considered acceptable by physicians and herbalists of the day who were convinced that such drastic treatment drew out 'humours'. In orthodox Western medicine the bark used also to be chosen in remedies for snake bites, syphilis and rheumatism. It was also chewed to ease toothache. In local areas in Germany a tincture was used for treating neuralgia. Russian peasants, and some of the French, once used the berries as a very strong laxative. Mezereon has been used in folk medicine in treatments for cancer too. Today the plant is considered to be so poisonous that it is no longer recommended for use in orthodox Western medicine – although the bark can be used in homoeopathic treatments.