

Eranthis hyemalis

[Synonyms : *Aconitum cilicicum*, *Aconitum hyemale*, *Aconitum x tubergenii*, *Cammarum hyemale*, *Eranthis bulgarica*, *Eranthis cilicicus*, *Eranthis hyemalis* var. *bulgaricus*, *Eranthis x tubergenii*, *Helleborus hyemalis*, *Koellea hyemalis*, *Robertia hiemalis*]

WINTER ACONITE is a perennial. Native to southern Europe it has buttercup-like, yellow flowers with many yellow stamens.

It is also known as *Bleidd-dag y Gaeaf* (Welsh), Cock's foot, New Year's gift, *Talovín zimní* (Czech), *Tavolín zimní* (Czech), *Tavolín zimný* (Slovak), *Vintergäck* (Swedish), *Winterakoniet* (Dutch), *Winterling* (German), and Winter wolfbane.

The flowers will only open when the air temperature exceeds 10⁰C. They are pollinated by bees and flies.

Warning – all parts of winter aconite are very poisonous. It is normally avoided by animals because of its burning taste.

Hyemalis means 'of Winter or flowering in Winter'.

Records indicate that winter aconite had been introduced to Britain before 1576. By the end of that Century the flower was a familiar sight in the gardens of the Country's capital. This dating does not fit entirely comfortably however with an English legend which ties their first appearance to the time of the Country's Roman occupation and the implication that they only emerge in places where the blood of Roman soldiers was spilled. [Julius Caesar (100 or 102-44 BC) invaded Britain in 54 BC and after the ultimate occupation by Rome, from about one century later, her soldiers only began to withdraw from 407.]

Authorities note nevertheless that the legend was believed to be responsible for the great interest in ancient Rome displayed by the much-loved English, detective-story writer, Dorothy Sayers (1893-1957). In January 1897 her family moved to a new home at Bluntisham, north of Cambridge, which is near the site of a Roman Camp. At that time as a very little girl she is said to have exclaimed in delight at the sight of yellow winter aconites that welcomed her – and it is told that her father then related this story.

One authority illustrates well the plant's lethal nature with a reference to a newspaper story of 1822. In this article it was reported that a Mrs. Gorst met an untimely death when she ate winter aconite tubers that she is alleged to have mistaken for those of horseradish (*A Armoracia rusticana*).