

Euphrasia officinalis

[Synonyms : *Euphrasia rostkoviana*]

EYEBRIGHT is a semi-parasitic annual. Native to Europe and western Asia it has white (red or purple) flowers.

It is also known as *Augentrost* (German), Bird's eye, *Casse lunettes* (French), Common eyebright, Drug eyebright, *Effros* (Welsh), Euphrasia, *Euphrasie vulgaire* (French), Euphrasy, Fairy flax, *Gemeiner Augentrost* (German), *Golwg Crist* (Welsh), *Ilygad Crist* (Welsh), Joy, Large sticky eyebright, Meadow eyebright, Peeweets, Red eyebright, Rock rue, and *Stor ögontröst* (Swedish); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of 'cheer up'.

Officinalis means 'of the shop (usually the apothecary's or herbalist's)'. Certain plants used for medicinal purposes, whether of actual or legendary value, were kept readily available and acquired this name.

Despite eyebright being celebrated today for its long use in the treatment of eye conditions it is likely that physicians overlooked it in this capacity before the Middle Ages. Suddenly in the 14th Century records 'abound' with recommendations for its use in the treatment of eye disorders. The doubtful Doctrine of Signatures may well have had some influence in eyebright's promotion as it was believed that the flecks on the flower were reminiscent of bloodshot eyes. (Thus this plant joins lungwort (*Pulmonaria officinalis*) in co-incidentally being applied to the right disorders for the wrong reasons.)

Eyebright is not overlooked in literature. In *Paradise Lost* the English poet, John Milton (1608-1674) writes

.....
Michael from Adam's eyes the film removed,
Which the false fruit, that promised clearer sight,
Had bred; then purged with euphrasy and rue
The visual nerve, for he had much to see.
.....

In England by the 16th Century eyebright seems to have been firmly established – not just for easing eye problems. It appears that it was made into wine and ale, the latter called Eyebright ale. Today it is principally used as an ingredient in an eye lotion that can be applied for such disorders as conjunctivitis. The plant is also used in homeopathic treatments.