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Ferula communis

GIANT FENNEL is a perennial. Native from southern Europe to Syria and North Africa, it has tiny, sour-smelling yellow flowers.

It is also known as African ammoniacum, *Anathrika* (Greek), *Caña* (Spanish), *Cañaheja* (Spanish), Common ferula, *Ferla* (Maltese), *Ferolo ordinara* (Esperanto), *Gemeines Rutenkraut* (German), *Ločidlo obecné* (Czech), Meeting seed, *Riesenfenchel* (German), and *Steckenkraut* (German).

The flowers are pollinated by flies.

Warning – some authorities suspect that giant fennel may be poisonous.

Communis means ‘common, general or growing with’.

The Greek poet, Hesiod (c. 8th Century BC) described how the legendary Prometheus brought fire stolen from the gods to man, hidden in a stick of giant fennel. (The dried pith in the stems will ignite and smoulder extremely slowly and in southern Europe such ‘fire’ stems were often carried from place to place.)

In parts of the Mediterranean the thick stems have been used to make furniture, particularly small stools for fishermen. The latter either used these to sit on in their boats or floated them, upside-down, as platforms to hold lamps to mark the position of their nets at night. Short pieces of stem were also used as bungs or corks in water pots.

The celebrated English clergyman, physician and naturalist, William Turner (c.1510-1568) is understood to have referred to giant fennel in 1548. It is contended by some authorities that in Britain giant fennel stem served as the schoolmaster’s first cane for admonishing unruly pupils. If this is true it heeds the direction given in Roman legend by Bacchus, god of wine. He proposed that those who imbibe should carry giant fennel wands so that anyone hit while under the influence of liquor will not be injured.

Today giant fennel can be seen growing in western Europe as a cultivated ornamental plant.