

Filipendula ulmaria

[Synonyms : *Spiraea ulmaria*, *Ulmaria pentapetala*]

MEADOWSWEET is a perennial. Native to Asia and Europe (including Britain), it has frothy heads of tiny white flowers with many long stamens.

It is also known as *Älggräs* (Swedish), *Barbe de cabra* (Spanish), Bittersweet, Bridewort, *Bugeiles-y-wierglodd* (Welsh), Common meadowsweet of Europe, Courtship and matrimony, Doll-off, Dropwort, *Echtes Mädesüss* (German), *Erva-ulmeira* (Portuguese), *Filipendula* (Italian), Goat's beard, *Grosse Spierstaude* (German), Hayriff, Herb Christopher, Honeysweet, Kiss-me-quick, Lady of the meadow, *La reine des prés* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Mädesüss* (German), Maid of the mead, Maids of the meadow, May of the meadow, Meadow-maid, Meadow queen, Meadow-soot, Meadow-wort, Meadsweet, Meaduart, Meadwort, *Mesiangervo* (Finnish), *Mjödört* (Swedish), *Moerasspriea* (Dutch), My lady's belt, New mown hay, *Piè di becco* (Italian), Pride of the meadow, Queen of the meadow, Queen's feather, *Regina dei prati* (Italian), *Reina de los Prados* (Spanish), *Reine des prés* (French), *Spierstaude* (German), *Spirée ulmaire* (French), Summer's farewell, Sweet bay, Sweet carduus fennel, Sweet fennel, Sweet hay, Tea bush, Teaflower, *Tužebník jilmový* (Czech), *Túžobník brestový* (Slovak), *Ulmaria* (Italian), *Ulmario* (Esperanto), *Wiesenkönigin* (German), and Wireweed; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of uselessness.

The plant flowers twice, the periods sometimes running into each other.

Ulmaria is derived from the genus name *Ulmus* meaning 'like plants in that (elm) genus' with reference to the leaflets.

This is believed to have been the favourite strewing herb of Queen Elizabeth I (1553-1603) of England. Here it was also preferred for strewing in churches at weddings and, combined with its popularity as a flower in bridal garlands (to which it would have imparted a sweet almond fragrance), it attracted the name Bridewort. At George IV's (1762-1830) coronation in 1820 he revived the old office of King's Herb-strewer and meadowsweet was amongst those plants that were strewn in the king's path. In contrast the popular modern European name Queen of the meadow could appear prosaic as it well reflects the plant's ability to dominate a low-lying damp meadow once it has established itself. The plant was also used to flavour mead and this may account for two older English names 'medewort' and 'meadowswete'.

Meadowsweet, with vervain (*Verbena officinalis*) and water mint (*Mentha aquatica*), was one of the few plants held most sacred by the Druids.

Superstition associated meadowsweet with death. Despite the fact that it was one of the plants which some churches favoured for strewing their aisles, particularly at celebrations, many Europeans believed it to be an omen of death. They refused to let it enter their homes and were convinced that its scent would cause a deep and permanent sleep. This superstition must have been foreign to Elizabeth I as John Parkinson (1567-1650), the famous London herbalist, noted that (as referred to earlier) she preferred meadowsweet beyond any other strewing plant on the floors of her rooms.

If copper is used as a mordant meadowsweet will yield a black dye.

The flowers of meadowsweet were used in making beer and wine. In fact it is mentioned as an ingredient in a drink called *Save* referred to by the famous English poet, Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1354-1400) in his *The Knightes Tale*. Today it may still be found as an element of herb beers.

For the drinks industry today meadowsweet provides a commercial ingredient for some Vermouths.

Meadowsweet, like white willow bark (*Salix alba*), is a natural source of salicylic acid upon which aspirin is based. This was first isolated from the plant in 1838 by an Italian professor. In the 1880s a synthetic drug, acetylsalicylic acid, was discovered by the Bayer Drug Company. This they named 'aspirin', which is understood to be a combination of 'acetyl' and an old botanical name for meadowsweet *Spirea*.

Medicinally, meadowsweet was used by herbalists for a wide range of problems, including blood disorders, eye ailments, diarrhoea, dysentery and fever. Today it can still be used for treating some stomach disorders and the fresh root is used in homoeopathic treatments.

It is the birthday flower for 17th May.