

Gentiana lutea

YELLOW GENTIAN is a perennial. Native to western Asia and southern Europe (particularly the Jura mountains and the Alps), it has bright orange-yellow flowers.

It is also known as *Argençana-dos-pastores* (Portuguese), Baldmoney, Bitter root, Bitterwort, Bitters, *Bitterwurzel* (German), Common gentian, Drug gentian, *Enzian* (German), Feldwode, Felwort, Fillwort, *Gelber Entian* (German), *Gelber Enzian* (German), *Genciana* (Spanish), *Genciana amarilla* (Spanish), *Genciana-das-boticas* (Portuguese), *Genciana mayor* (Spanish), *Genciano flava* (Esperanto), Gentian, *Gentiane* (French), *Gentiane jaune* (French), Gentian root, *Genziana gialla* (Italian), *Genziana maggiore* (Italian), *Gintiyana* (Persian), *Grande gentiane* (French), Greater yellow gentian, Great yellow gentian, *Gullgentiana* (Swedish), *Güsad* (Turkish), *Horec žltý* (Slovak), *Hořec žlutý* (Czech), *Jintiyana* (Arabic), *Keltakatkerö* (Finnish), *Pakhanbhed* (Indian), Pale gentian, and *Schnapswurzel* (German); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of Autumn loveliness, and ‘may your dreams be sweet’ (closed flower).

Fermented and distilled root produces ‘gentian grappa’.

Warning – it should not be taken internally for medicinal purposes if suffering from blood disorders, and it may be unsuitable for those suffering from gallbladder or kidney diseases. Large doses can cause nausea and vomiting. (Yellow gentian rivals rue (*Ruta graveolens*) in its bitter taste.) It is avoided by cattle.

Trade demands made upon yellow gentian in Europe are such that it has been the subject of over harvesting and since the end of the 1990s its future survival has been viewed as threatened.

Yellow gentian has a similar appearance to white hellebore (*Veratrum album*) but white hellebore has leaves in ranks of 3 on the stem.

Lutea means ‘deep yellow’ with reference to the flowers.

Britain has several native species of gentian but yellow gentian is believed to have been the first foreign species of this family introduced to that Country. It has been growing there since at least the 16th Century when John Gerard (1545-1612), the English barber-surgeon and herbalist (the latter as a charlatan for many authorities) recorded that he had received plants from a noted French physician in Burgundy.

In Britain before the introduction of hops (*Humulus lupulus*), the bitter yellow gentian was occasionally used in brewing beer. In the 18th Century gentian was taken as a pre-dinner apéritif to aid digestion. The fresh root has also been used to make alcoholic drinks in Switzerland and Germany.

The root has been employed in veterinary medicine as much as it has in human remedies especially to encourage appetite. (There was a period when gentian was imported into England for human medicinal purposes and this led the English botanist, Dr. J.R. Thornton to point out in his *Family Herbal* published in 1814, that there were many native species that he believed were equally beneficial.)

The fermented root is used commercially today in apéritifs, syrups, sparkling drinks, vermouth, angostura and Stockton bitters (a brandy is also prepared by distillation and an apéritif can also be prepared by infusing the root in white wine). It is used by the food industry in

confectionery – and a. powdered root is an ingredient used in veterinary medicines for improving appetite.

This was one of the at least 36 ingredients used by Mithridates (c.132-63 BC), the 1st Century King of Pontus (northern Turkey), in a poison antidote (known as Antidotum Mithridaticum or Theriac) which he took daily to acquire an overall immunity – an important consideration if it is remembered that he gained his position of power by poisoning his opposition.

Medicinally, yellow gentian has been used as an alternative to quinine (*Cinchona officinalis*) in the treatment of malaria. Herbalists have also used the root to treat aching joints, stomach pains, bruises, liver complaints, hysteria, jaundice, wounds and snake bites. Yellow gentian has been prescribed as a tonic for general debility and weakness, as well as loss of appetite. It was also as today used as a tonic and an antiseptic. Modern medicine recognizes yellow gentian particularly as a gastric stimulant in the treatment of many gastrointestinal disorders and it is still chosen to combat loss of appetite. Additionally it can be an ingredient in remedies for anaemia, and can be given to convalescents or to anyone suffering from physical exhaustion.

Using different species with the same qualities Chinese medicine extends this modern list to conjunctivitis, hepatitis, jaundice, various skin disorders and some urinary infections. (The ‘gentian violet’ used for skin disorders is made from coal tar not a gentian species.) It is the birthday flower for 27th November.