

Geum urbanum

[Synonyms : *Geum rivale* subsp. *urbanum*, *Radix caryophyllata*]

WOOD AVENS is a perennial. Native to western Asia, Europe and the Mediterranean, it has small pale yellow flowers.

It is also known as *Ambretta* (Italian), Avens, Avens root, Benedict's herb, Bennet, Bennet herb, *Benoîte* (French), Blessed herb, *Cariofilada* (Spanish), *Cariofillata* (Italian), *Carlada* (Portuguese), City avens, Clove root, Colewort, Cowwort, *Echte Nelkenwurz* (German), *Erba benedetta* (Italian), *Erva benta* (Portuguese), European avens, *Feber-Nellikerod* (Danish), *Ganiofilia* (Spanish), Geum, *Gewöhnliche Nelkenwurz* (German), Golden star, Goldy star, Goldy stone, Harefoot, Herb Bennet, *Hierba de San Benito* (Spanish), *Hèrbe b'nêt* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Hiofi* (Portuguese), Holy herb, Indian chocolate, *Kuklík mestský* (Slovak), *Kuklík městský* (Czech), *Kuklík obecný* (Czech), *Kyläkellukka* (Finnish), *Mapgoll* (Welsh), Minarta, *Nejlikrot* (Swedish), *Nelkenwurz* (German), Ram's foot, St. Benedict's flower, St. Benedict's herb, *Sanamunda* (Portuguese), Star-of-the-earth, *Vanlig nejlikrot* (Swedish), Water flower, Way Bennet, Wild rye, Yellow avens, Yellow herb, and Yellow strawberry.

The fruit which look like tiny dark crimson balls are covered with hooked bristles and are dispersed by animals.

Urbanum is derived from Latin *urbs* (city) meaning 'of or from towns'.

Many of its common names reflect the fact that the plant was named after St. Benedict.

In medieval times the plant was thought to be able to drive away evil spirits (because of its strongly aromatic roots) and was worn in amulets and kept in the house.

At that time it was often called *herba benedicta* from the Latin meaning 'the blessed herb' (of which Herb Bennet is also said to be a corruption). Wood avens was considered to be a sacred plant and the upper leaves, together with three leaflets and five golden petals, were for Christians a symbol of the Holy Trinity and the five wounds of Christ on the cross.

The plant appears in both church architecture and paintings of the Medieval period.

One of its fascinating qualities, shared with only a few other plants, is that it is believed to be slightly radioactive when fresh. It is contended therefore that it can help to relieve pain purely by touching it to the affected area.

In medieval Europe when food was often garishly coloured wood avens was one of the plants used by the chefs to provide a green colouring. And the dried underground stem was once used domestically not only to flavour ale (and prevent it from turning sour) but also as an alternative to cloves (*Syzygium aromaticum*) in broths and soups. The leaves were used to make a hot cordial.

Pieces of the underground stem were hung amongst clothes to repel moths and they were placed between linen to impart a pleasant scent.

Wood avens is used today on a commercial basis by the drinks industry in making liqueurs and beer.

Medicinally, the roots of wood avens were recommended by herbalists for treating chest ailments, stomach disorders, diarrhoea, colic and poisonous bites. (It was also thought to give protection against bubonic plague.) Today it is used mostly in folk medicine.