

Gratiola officinalis

[Synonyms : *Gratiola virginica*]

HEDGE HYSSOP is a perennial. Native to northern temperate areas (including southern Europe, North America and northern and western Asia), it has small, purple or purplish-red veined, white flowers with yellowish bases.

It is also known as Clammy hedge hyssop, *Gnadenkraut* (German), *Gottesgnadenkraut* (German), Gratiola, Gratiolle (English, French), *Gratiolo oficina* (Esperanto), Hyssop, *Jordgalla* (Swedish), *Konitrud lékařský* (Czech), *Séné des prés* (French), Smooth hedge hyssop, and Virginia hedge hyssop.

Warning – hedge hyssop is extremely poisonous. It is a drastic purgative, and can cause vomiting, cramps, heart disorders, breathing paralysis and death. It should be avoided during pregnancy and breast-feeding, and can only be used under the supervision of a qualified practitioner. It is poisonous for cattle.

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.

Apparently it is reported that hedge hyssop grows in profusion in parts of Switzerland and, because of its poisonous qualities for them, cows have to be kept away from it.

Records suggest that, like the Puritan settlers in North America (who used alecost leaves, *Tanacetum balsamita*) some of the older Swiss matriarchs put hedge hyssop leaves in their Bibles so that the strong scent can help keep them awake during sermons.

Introduced to northern Europe in the Middle Ages it was used as a purgative and may well have been responsible for some extremely unpleasant deaths. Despite this it is claimed by some authorities that it attracted such descriptive words as *Gratia* and *Gratia Dei* (‘thanks-be-to-God’) for its effect. Herbalists used to recommend it for treating jaundice, fluid retention, liver disorders and worms. Although since the 16th Century its use has been negligible, homoeopathic practices are beginning to reintroduce it today.