

Hydrastis canadensis

GOLDEN SEAL is a perennial. Native to eastern North America it has small greenish-white flowers with many prominent, greenish-white stamens.

It is also known as Curcuma, Eye balm, Eye root, Golden root, Gold seal, Ground raspberry, *Hydrastis* (Finnish), *Hydrastiswurzel* (German), Ice root, Indian dye, Indian iceroot, Indian paint, Indian plant, Indian tumeric, Indian turmeric, Jaundice root, *Kanadische Gelbwurz* (German), Ohio curcuma, Orange root, Tumeric root, Turmeric root, Warnera, Wild curcuma, Wild turmeric, Yellow eye, Yellow eye wright, Yellow Indian paint, Yellow paint root, Yellow puccoon, Yellow root, Yellow seal, and Yellow-wort.

Warning – large doses of the plant can be poisonous. It must not be taken internally during pregnancy. Used on the skin, it will leave a yellow stain and can cause dermatitis.

The plant is viewed as threatened in the wild from over-harvesting.

Canadensis means ‘of or from Canada or north-eastern North America’.

The plant used to flourish in North America and Indian tribes used it as the source of a yellow dye, which was suitable to dye cloth and weapons, and to stain their faces.

For several North American Indian tribes golden seal was a source of medicine. Both Cherokee and Iroquois tribes used it to treat indigestion. While however the former also employed it as a remedy for some cancers and as an appetite enhancer (as well as applying it to skin inflammation and taking it as a tonic), the Iroquois prescribed it for treating earache, sore eyes, whooping-cough, pneumonia, tuberculosis, fever generally, diarrhoea, and heart and liver disorders. The root was used to ease chapped lips by Micmac Indians.

Early settlers were introduced to golden seal’s qualities by local Indian tribes. By 1850 it had gained such a reputation among them medicinally that it had become a commercial proposition on the American Continent and demand for it continued to increase into the early 20th Century both in North America itself and, to a much lesser extent, overseas. This ever-increasing demand was highlighted by the United States Department of Agriculture in 1905. As the Century progressed however its unheeded collection from the wild, combined with deforestation (which depleted its natural habitat) not only depleted the source of supply dramatically but also increased the price astronomically – and led to successful attempts at commercial cultivation.

Folk medicine still uses the wild root (which today is both rare and expensive) and some fear for the future of the species in the wild because of this. One belief that must have contributed to the headlong rush to find the plant was that it was alleged that results of urine tests could be masked by golden seal. This theory that was not only actively subscribed to by some people but also formed the basis for a murder plot in an 1890 novel. The view prevailed until relatively recently when clinical studies carried out on human beings in 1975, and on race horses ten years later, proved it to be groundless.

Medicinally, herbalists used to recommend the roots as a tonic, an aid to digestion, a remedy for treating night sweats as well as vomiting and constipation, and a treatment for liver disorders, loss of appetite, sore eyes and ulcers and, in the form of snuff, nasal catarrh. Today particularly it is used internally as a treatment for gastritis, period problems, peptic ulcers and colitis, and is applied externally for ear inflammation, conjunctivitis and eczema.

