

Hyoscyamus niger

[Synonyms : *Hyoscyamus agrestis*, *Hyoscyamus agrostis*, *Hyoscyamus bohemicus*, *Hyoscyamus flavus*, *Hyoscyamus lethalis*, *Hyoscyamus niger* var. *anuus*, *Hyoscyamus niger* var. *chinensis*, *Hyoscyamus pallidus*, *Hyoscyamus vulgaris*]

HENBANE is an annual or biennial. Native to temperate Asia and Europe it has small, dark purple centred, yellow-brown or creamy-yellow flowers.

It is also known as *Ajwain khurasani* (Urdu), *Bazarbang* (Kashmiri), *Belene*, *Bilzekeruid* (Dutch), *Black henbane*, *Black hyoscyamus*, *Blen čierny* (Slovak), *Blin černý* (Czech), *Bolmört* (Swedish), *Bruisewort*, *Bulmeurt* (Danish), *Cassilago*, *Cassilata*, *Chenile*, *Common henbane*, *Deus caballinus*, *Devil's cabbage*, *Devil's eye*, *Fetid nightshade*, *Hanebane* (French), *Hannebanne* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Hebona*, *Henbeem*, *Henbean*, *Henbell*, *Hog's bean*, *Hyoscyamus*, *Insana*, *Insane root*, *Jupiter's bean*, *Jusquiamé noire* (French), *Khura-saniavayan* (Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi), *Khurasaniova* (Marathi), *Khurashanivamam* (Telugu), *Llewyg yr Iâr* (Welsh), *Loaves of bread*, *Lord hog bean*, *Parasikaya* (Sanskrit), *Poison tobacco*, *Schwarzes Bilsenkraut* (German), *Stinking henbane*, *Stinking nightshade*, *Stinking Roger*, *Symphonica*, and *Villikaali* (Finnish); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of imperfection.

Warning – the plant (fresh or dried) is poisonous and must only be used by a qualified practitioner. It can cause dry mouth, dilated pupils, dizziness, nausea, delirium, increased weak pulse rate, headaches, a red cast over the field of vision, convulsions, euphoria, hallucinations, coma and death. In Britain it is a prescription only medicine and only obtainable from a registered pharmacist. It is equally poisonous for poultry and most animals which probably avoid it because of its smell.

In Britain at least henbane is considered endangered in the wild.

Henbane's roots look similar to those of chicory (*Cichorium intybus*) and garden parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*). It is also similar in appearance to hound's-tongue (*Cynoglossum officinale*) and bugloss (*Anchusa officinalis*), apart from the former's spiny fruit.

Niger means 'black'.

In classical mythology the dead are described as crowned with henbane and wandering along the banks of the river Styx that surrounded the Underworld. Some authorities also surmise that in ancient Greece the Delphic priestesses may have given prophecies while under the effects of henbane.

Apparently translation of a Babylonian clay tablet which is believed to date back to about 2250 BC shows that the seeds were being recommended then for easing toothache. It is certain that the ancient Egyptians were familiar with one of the species of henbane by at least 1500 BC as it is mentioned in the *Ebers papyrus*, a medical document made up of 110 scrolled pages, which is believed to date back to about 1552 BC. (The papyrus is believed to have been discovered in about 1862 and to have been purchased in Thebes in 1873 by the German egyptologist, Georg Moritz Ebers (1837-1898). Today Professor Ebers (professor of egyptology at Leipzig from 1875-1889) is said to be best known for his novels set in ancient Egypt, and his papyrus is thought to be the oldest preserved medical document.)

The Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus (c.37-c.100), describes the seed vessel in great detail in the work he wrote entitled *Jewish Antiquities* because it seems that this was the model for one of the ornaments on the head-dress of the Jewish High Priests.

Records of 1672 show that even by then henbane had become naturalized in North America. In Britain it is less common now than it was during Queen Elizabeth I's reign in the 16th Century and tends to be localized, particularly in East Anglia.

Henbane is known to have had strong magical connotations at least as far back as Assyrian times over 2000 years ago. According to Assyrian tablets it seems that henbane secured to the outer door and hinges was believed to be sure protection for the house against sorcery. Nearer to the present day, the plant's reputation was strong in Europe during the Middle Ages. Its potency led to its inclusion in both witches' magical brews and love potions that could produce convulsions as well as, it is said, temporary madness. (It was also believed to be an ingredient in versions of the so-called 'flying ointment' that was supposed to be smeared on both witches and their broomsticks.) Burnt, the fumes from henbane were believed to be able to endow clairvoyant powers, as well as conjure up the spirits of the dead. The plant was also used as a charm in necklaces made for children to ease their teething problems and protect them from fits. Perhaps of greater significance, witches are known to have given henbane to young initiates before their induction into witchcraft to free their inhibitions and enable them to be persuaded to take part in midnight Sabbat rituals.

John Gerard (1545-1612), the English barber-surgeon and herbalist (the latter as a charlatan for many authorities), and others, describe how the fumes were actually employed by some of the less reputable dentists and herbalists of the Middle Ages. The smoke from henbane seeds burning in a chafing dish provided the cover for these doubtful practitioners to persuade their patients that they had removed worms from the teeth, the mouth or other part of the body. The unwitting patient was required to hold his mouth open in the smoke over the dish while an accomplice dropped pieces of lute string into the water to give the effect of squirming worms. These same seeds, crushed, were also used as a very dangerous treatment for easing toothache.

Shakespeare (1564-1616), the English playwright, poet and actor-manager, has *Hamlet's* father murdered by pouring a distillation of henbane (according to some authorities) into his ear. Some authorities have noted that in many of the stories familiar in the West under the title *The Thousand and One Nights* henbane smoke is part of the plot or less often a henbane potion is drunk usually to put people to sleep to enable a daring rescue.

In real life, in England in 1910, Dr. Crippen (1862-1910), the American murderer, was hung for killing his wife. He had used hyoscine, a poison that can be extracted from henbane. This was to be the first murder hunt in which wireless telegraphy played a part. Captain Kendall who commanded S.S. *Montrose*, an Atlantic liner out of Antwerp, radioed Scotland Yard to inform them that his suspicions had been aroused about a 'Mr.' and a 'Master Robinson' (Crippen and his secretary/lover Ethel) aboard his vessel because of their unusually affectionate behaviour towards each other. Chief Inspector Dew, who had been investigating the case and had found remains of Belle Crippen's body in the cellar of the Crippens' North London home (remains which proved to contain traces of hyoscine), caught up with the *Montrose* in a faster vessel, confronted the suspects and returned them to England for trial.

Despite the fact that it has been known for some time that henbane is poisonous for most animals, a small quantity of the seeds used to be fed to both cattle and horses to fatten them. It seems that this strange idea was based on the belief that the stupor inflicted would promote increased weight.

Medicinally, this powerful plant has been used from at least Assyrian times. Most of the classical physicians promoted one or other of the species in this genus, although Pliny (23-79), the Roman natural historian, appears to have written henbane off as being 'offensive to the understanding'. 10th Century records make reference to it under the name *Jusquiasmus* which is presumed to be the derivation of the plant's French name. Henbane in one form or another was recommended by herbalists for reducing painful swellings, treating gout, headaches, aching joints and in particular toothache. In more recent times it has been part of treatment for ulcers, various respiratory diseases (including whooping-cough and asthma), insomnia and rheumatism. It has sometimes been used as an alternative to opium (*Papaver somniferum*), as well as providing an antispasmodic. It can also be part of Western orthodox medicinal treatment for various nervous or pain disorders, and is retained today in the pharmacopoeias of some European and South American countries for use in the treatment of certain specific spasms. Homoeopathic remedies (which use minute quantities of a plant) can include henbane as well. Today henbane is used by the pharmaceutical industry in certain proprietary medications and in travel sickness remedies.