

*Hypericum perforatum*

[Synonyms : *Hypericum nachitschevanicum*, *Hypericum noeanum*, *Hypericum perforatum* var. *confertiflora*, *Hypericum perforatum* var. *microphyllum*, *Hypericum pseudoperfoliatum*, *Hypericum vulgare*]

**PERFORATE ST. JOHN’S-WORT** is a semi-evergreen, invasive shrub. Native to temperate regions of Europe and western Asia it has small, golden yellow flowers with many long, yellow stamens.

It is also known as *Achlasan Chaluimchille* (Irish Gaelic), *Äkta johhansört* (Swedish), *Allus Muire* (Irish Gaelic), Amber, Balm of warrior’s wounds, Balsam, *Balsana* (Urdu), *Basant* (Hindi, Punjabi), *Cacciadiavoli* (Italian), *Cache-dgiábl'ye* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), Cammock, *Čarovník* (Czech), *Chasse-diable* (French), Cola weed, Common St. John’s wort, *Corazoncillo* (Spanish), Devil chaser, Devil’s flight, Devil’s scourge, Devil’s sourage, *Echtes Johanniskraut* (German), Eola wood, *Erba di San Giovanni* (Italian), *Eurinllys Trydwl* (Welsh), *Gemeines Johanniskraut* (German), Goatweed, God’s wonderplant, Grace of God, Hardhay, *Hartheu* (German), *Herbe à mille pertus* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Herbe aux piqûres* (French), *Herbe de Saint Jean* (French), Herb John, Herb of St. John, Human blood, Hundred holes, *Iperico commune* (Italian), *Johanneskraut* (German), *Johanneskruid* (Afrikaans), *Johannesört* (Swedish), Johnswort, Klamath weed, *Közönséges orbáncfü* (Hungarian), *Krevniček* (Czech), Large marsh St. John’s wort, Lord God’s wonder plant, *Lubovník bodkovaný* (Slovak), *Lus Cholmcille* (Irish Gaelic), *Lus na Maighdine Muire* (Irish Gaelic), *Mäkikuisma* (Finnish), *Mayasil otu* (Turkish), *Milles pertins* (French), Penny John, Penny join, Perfoliate St. John’s wort, *Perforata* (Italian), Pertuisane, *Pilatiro* (Italian), *Prostřelenec* (Czech), Rosin rose, St. Columba’s flower, St. John, St. John’s bush, St. John’s wort, *Sintjanskruid* (Dutch), Speckled John, *Svatojanská bylina* (Czech), Sword plant, Terrestrial sun, Tipton weed, Touch and heal, *Třezalka tečkovaná* (Czech), *Tüpfelharthen* (German), *Tüpfel-Johanniskraut* (German), Tutsan, Witches’ herb, *Yara otu* (Turkish), *Ysgol Crist* (Welsh), *Ysgol Fair* (Welsh), and *Zveroboi* (Russian); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of animosity, simplicity, superstition, and ‘you are a prophet’.

Warning – the plant above ground is poisonous and the poisonous elements are not destroyed by drying. The leaves and flowers can make the skin sensitive to light. They can be poisonous for some animals (particularly those that are pale skinned), especially cattle, sheep, horses and goats, and they are normally avoided by them. If animals eat too much however, especially horses and sheep, they can suffer skin hypersensitivity, and permanent blindness, and can also refuse food and starve to death.

*Perforatum* is derived from Latin *perforo* (to pierce through) meaning ‘with or appearing to have small holes, or transparent or clear spots’.

*Zveroboi* means ‘beast killer’ in Russian and recognizes that the plant can be poisonous for animals. There are several reasons suggested for the plant being christened Perforate St John’s-wort. Not least among these poses that as the crushed yellow flowers will turn red (a red fluorescent pigment is released) and the flower blooms on Midsummer Day (24<sup>th</sup> June, the Saint Day of St. John the Baptist who was beheaded in about 30 AD) it led to

the plant being called Perforate St. John's-wort (St. John's herb). One traditional practice required the flowers to be gathered on 24<sup>th</sup> June and soaked in olive oil for several days. This would produce a blood-red oil that was called 'blood of Christ' and was used for anointing.

It was said that the ancient Greeks used to place perforate St. John's-wort over images of the gods as it was believed that its odour could repel evil spirits and purify the air.

The Middle Ages (in several European countries) saw the annual fires that were lit on hills and high places on St. John's Eve (23<sup>rd</sup> June), a custom that in Britain is believed by some to have originated with the ancient Gauls and in France was referred to as *feux de joie*. The fires were supposed to purify the air of evil spirits and various plants were smoked in them ensuring the protection of people, animals and crops alike. The plants, when they had been correctly smoked, were not only hung in houses and barns to perpetuate this protection but they could also be worn in amulets. Perforate St. John's-wort was accompanied on the fires by chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*), elder (*Sambucus nigra*), common figwort (*Scrophularia nodosa*), fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare* var. *dulce*), greater plantain (*Plantago major*), hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*), lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*), male-fern (*Dryopteris filix-mas*), mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*), ivy (*Hedera helix*), ribbed clover (*Melilotus officinalis*), vervain (*Verbena officinalis*) and yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) – and in some areas the French supplemented these with living cats as familiars of witch or devil. In France the bonfire ceremonies are claimed by some authorities to explain the background to a French phrase

*avoir toutes les herbes de la St. Jean*

('to be prepared for anything'). Another belief has been attributed by different authorities both to the Isle of Wight (off the south coast of Britain) and to the Isle of Man (in the Irish Sea). This contended that you stepped on perforate St. John's-wort at your peril as if you did so you would be carried away on a fairy horse from which you would not be released until sunrise – and then you would be deposited a long way from home. As a love oracle if a girl picked the flower on Midsummer Eve and it was still fresh the following morning, she was considered to have good chances of matrimony. Then again there are several European stories in which perforate St. John's-wort plays a significant and benign role in ridding people of demons or ghosts while, in contrast, across the Atlantic in North America (no doubt because of its excessively invasive nature), the plant rapidly acquired a malignant reputation following its introduction there.

In parts of Australia and some western states of the United States between 1930 and 1951, many animals were lost from *Hypericum*-poisoning. Not only did they suffer but the ranchers also experienced significant financial loss. It usually occurred in areas that were being over-grazed and was partially resolved by reducing the number of animals on the land. It was also aided by the release of a glossy, blue beetle that was imported by both countries from South America. The adult beetle ate perforate St. John's-wort's flowers and seeds, while its larvae enjoyed the roots and stems. This experience must have contributed to the decision made in 1977 by the United States to include perforate St. John's-wort on her 'unsafe herb list'.

Some North American Indian tribes came to know the plant and included it in their medicinal repertoire. Both the Iroquois and Cherokee tribes used it to treat fever, while the Montagnais Indians prescribed it for coughs. The Cherokee also chose it records note for treating some period problems, venereal disease, nosebleeds, diarrhoea, snake bites and sores.

Perforate St. John's-wort in alcoholic extract yields a violet-red silk or wool dye. It is an emblem of the Scottish MacKinnon clan.

The antibiotic in the plant has been patented as a possible food preservative for commercial use. Perforate St. John's-wort is used by the drinks industry in alcoholic drinks, and also by the cosmetics industry. In addition it is an ingredient in some proprietary medicines. Medicinally, perforate St. John's-wort has always had much to offer and continues to be used in European folk medicine. It was familiar to the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Greek physician, Dioscorides, who found it particularly useful while he was physician to Roman soldiers. In the Middle Ages it was often used to treat deep sword cuts (and more recent research in Germany has confirmed its anti-bacterial qualities). Herbalists also used it to treat lung disorders, dysentery, diarrhoea, jaundice, haemorrhages, hysteria, sciatica, snake bites (particularly in Brazil), wounds and bedsores. In Russia it was used to treat rabies. Today it can be chosen in treatments for rheumatism, coughs, colds, anxiety states and menopausal problems and it is also used in homoeopathic treatments. It is the birthday flower for 29<sup>th</sup> June.