

### *Inula helenium*

[Synonyms : *Aster helenium*, *Aster officinalis*, *Convisartia helenium*, *Enula campana*, *Helenium grandiflorum*, *Inula campana*]

**ELECAMPANE** is a perennial. Native to north-western and central Asia it has shaggy sunflower-like bright yellow flowers with prominent yellow centres.

It is also known as *Ålandsrot* (Swedish), *Alant* (German, Swedish), *Allecampane*, *Allicampane*, *Aunée* (French), *Autumn sneezewort*, *Campana* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Common elecampane*, *Echte-Alant* (German), *Elecampane inula*, *Elfdock*, *Elfwort*, *Elicompane*, *Elinsrot* (Swedish), *Else-dock*, *Enula* (Italian), *Enula campana* (Spanish), *Golden samphire*, *Grande aunée* (French), *Griekse alant* (Dutch), *Horse-elder*, *Horseheal*, *Iane dé campana* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Inul*, *Inula*, *Inula campana* (Italian), *Inule grande aunée* (French), *Isohirvenjuuri* (Finnish), *Marchalan* (Welsh), *Oeul de cheval* (French), *Oman pravý* (Czech), *Rasan* (Arabic, Persian), *Roman ginger*, *Scabwort*, *Starwort*, *Sunflower*, *Velvet dock*, *Wild sunflower*, *Yellow starwort*, and *Zanjbil-e-roomi* (Urdu).

The flowers are pollinated by bees and hover-flies.

Warning – elecampane may be poisonous for animals.

In Britain elecampane is considered endangered in the wild.

*Helenium* means ‘like plants in that (*Helenium*) genus’.

There appears to be some controversy over the derivation of the common name Elecampane.

One version contends that the plant was once called ‘Helen’s bell’ (*Inula campana*) and that this name was corrupted in the old mummers’ plays in England to ‘hell-and-come-pain’. In the 13<sup>th</sup> Century the Welsh physicians of Myddvai called the plant *Marchalan*.

Greeks, Romans, Anglo-Saxons and Celts all used the plant both medicinally, and as a vegetable and condiment. It is referred to not only by the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Greek physician, Dioscorides, but also by many others, including Pliny (23-79), the noted Roman natural historian. The Romans took crystallized root to stimulate the appetite and also believed it was invaluable for aiding digestion after a rich meal – and they also ate the dried root mixed with fruits it as a food and flavouring (the latter particularly in soups). In the East it was not only an important spice and medicine but it was also burnt as incense. During the Middle Ages in Europe elecampane was assiduously cultivated (especially in monastery gardens) for medicinal purposes. In Britain particularly flat pink, sugary cakes of candied root were not only enjoyed as a sweetmeat but were also chewed and sucked to ease asthma and indigestion. They were also chewed to sweeten the breath. Its use as a confectionery flavouring continued until the 1920s and in some parts of Germany it can still be used this way today.

Elecampane was introduced to North America by the early settlers and came to be known to North American Indian tribes who absorbed it into their human and veterinary medicinal practices (not least the Iroquois and Mohican tribes). It was used in remedies for general lung problems by the Cherokee, Mohican and Iroquois Indians. They prescribed it specifically for tuberculosis (especially in Iroquois children), and the Cherokee and Iroquois tribes also prescribed it for treating coughs and asthma. Elecampane seems to have been an especially popular medicine among the Iroquois as it could be

recommended for fluid retention, stomach problems, stroke patients, fever (including typhoid), indigestion and rheumatism – and they also applied it to cuts and sores. For the Delaware Indians the plant was a tonic, and the Cherokee apart from anything else used it for treating some female problems. Malecite, and Iroquois Indians (and some of the Delaware) all treated colds with it. The Micmac and Malecite tribes took it for headaches, and they and the Iroquois used it to treat some heart disorders.

The roots, mixed with bilberries (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) and ashes, will yield a blue dye.

The essence is used today as flavouring in some wines (vermouth), and liqueurs, particularly in central Europe, and it is also used by the perfumery industry for scenting perfumes.

In veterinary medicine (particularly as a remedy for skin diseases), elecampane was given to sheep and horses, and is still so used today.

Medicinally, some authorities are sceptical about its famed value in bygone days and suggest that it may well have caused more harm than good. The plant (usually the root) continues to be used in Western folk medicine although no longer for the treatment of skin diseases, fevers and fluid retention for which it was once popular. (Traditionally it had also been a remedy for snake bites and its use in one Anglo-Saxon recipe was prescribed with ritual that contributed to a medicine given to repel elf-sickness.) It was, and still can be, recommended for various respiratory ailments (including bronchitis and coughs) and also for treating nausea and diarrhoea. Chinese medicine uses the flowers as a remedy for some cancers.