

### *Iris florentina*

[Synonyms : *Iris x germanica* 'Florentina', *Iris violacea*]

**ORRIS** is an evergreen perennial. Considered to be a variety from southern Europe it has large scented, blue-veined and bright yellow bearded, white flowers.

It is also known as Blue flag, Fleur-de lis, Florence, Florentine iris, Florentine orris, *Florentinische Schwertlilie* (German), *Florentinsk iris* (Swedish), Flower de luce, Flower de luce of Florence, *Giaggolo* (Italian), Glaive lily, Iris (English, French), *Iris de Florence* (French), *Kosatec* (Slovak), Orris root, *Raiz de lirio* (Spanish), *Saksankurjenmieikka* (Finnish), *Schwertlilie* (German), *Trädgårdsiris* (Swedish), *Violrot* (Swedish), White flower de luce, and White iris; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of eloquence, faith (petals), hope, 'I have a message from you', light, message, my compliments, power, primeval fire, royalty, valour (petals), and wisdom (petals).

The underground stem (of 2-3 year old plants) is dug up, washed and scraped (a labour intensive process), dried in the sun for 10 days and then stored to mature for 4-6 months for the fragrance to develop. (About 1,000 tons of fresh root yield approximately 300 tons of dry root.) It is then ground into a powder. The root is also subjected to steam distillation to produce a yellowish-white essence or oil referred to as Oil of Orris) or Orris butter. (The scent does not reach its maximum intensity for at least 2 years.)

Warning – fresh root stock taken internally can be a violent purgative. Large doses of the orris powder taken internally can cause vomiting and allergic reactions. In Britain orris powder is on the general sales list for external medicinal use only. Smelling or touching the dried root can cause allergic reactions.

*Florentina* means 'of or from Florence' (Italy).

Ancient Egyptian, ancient Greek and Roman records show that the powdered underground stem has been used in perfumery for several thousand years. At least two noted Greeks, the philosopher Theophrastus (c.372-c.287 BC), and the 1<sup>st</sup> Century physician Dioscorides, make mention of it as well as the Roman natural historian, Pliny the Elder (23-79), who contended that the best source of orris during his lifetime was to be found in Illyricum (Dalmatia today).

For the Moslems this is the flower of the dead that can often be found planted in cemeteries. As mentioned earlier orris appears on the red shield in the armorial bearings of the City of Florence.

In England orris root was being used to perfume linen by at least the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century as the 1480 Wardrobe Accounts for Edward IV (1442-1483) bear witness. Laundries also added the root to rinsing water.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century the powdered root was used as a hair powder and today, when time or circumstances dictate, it can be employed as a dry hair shampoo as it removes grease and leaves a pleasant smell. It was also used as a toothpowder and chewed as a breath sweetener, as well as being employed as a moth repellent. In Russia in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (if not before) one of the drinks sold by street sellers there was flavoured with the root, and it seems from records that in England orris was added to some brandy-type drinks. It was also given to teething children to chew, and larger roots were shaped into beads for rosaries or figures for ornaments.

With iron as the mordant the underground stem will produce a greyish-black dye.

Today orris root is commercially processed and prized for its violet-scented powder and the extracted oil (Orris butter) that are used primarily by the perfumery industry particularly in France and in such celebrated perfumes as the Italian 'Frangipani'. Orris is unusual in that it has the power to enhance other fragrances. In addition the powdered root acts as a fixative not only in perfumery but also in pot pourri. It also provides a bitter commercial flavouring for some liqueurs, and is as an ingredient in tooth powders, toothpastes, toilet waters, face powders and dusting powders. For all of this according to some authorities several species or hybrids of orris are grown although it should be said that their categorization seems to be open to some contention.

Medicinally, the powdered underground stem was recommended by herbalists particularly for the treatment of respiratory disorders and chronic diarrhoea. The juice was taken as a powerful purgative and used in the treatment of fluid retention. Now however even in folk medicine the plant is rarely called upon.

It is the birthday flower for 6<sup>th</sup> September.