

*Iris versicolor*

[Synonyms : *Iris americana versicolor*]

**PURPLE IRIS** is a deciduous, aquatic perennial. Native to eastern North America it has beardless, blue-violet (marked with yellow and white at base) flowers.

It is also known as American laevigata, Blue flag, Blue iris, Blue lily, *Brokiris* (Swedish), *Buntfarbige Schwertlilie* (German), Cat-tail flag, *Clajoux* (French-Canadian), Dagger flower, Dragon flower, Flag lily, Fleur-de-lis, Flower-de-luce, Flowering flag, *Glaïeul des marais* (French-Canadian), Harlequin blue flag, Iris, *Kosatec* (Slovak), *Kosatec strakatý* (Czech), Larger blue flag, Liver lily, *Maka-skithe* (Omaha and Ponca North American Indian), Marsh iris, Poison flag, Poison flagroot, Purple flag, *Schillernde Schwertlilie* (German), Snake lily, Varied-color iris, Vegetable mercury, Water flag, and Wild iris; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of flame.

The flowers are pollinated by bees.

Warning – fresh underground stem or large doses of any part of the plant taken internally are poisonous. They can cause purging, liver disorders, abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, facial neuralgia and collapse. Dermatitis can be caused from handling the plant. It is poisonous for some animals.

Purple iris can be confused with sweet-flag (*Acorus calamus*) when they are not in flower although its leaves are dull blue-green unlike the glossy, yellowish-green sweet flag blades.

*Versicolor* is Latin (variously coloured, parti-coloured, changing colour).

The stiff and sword-shaped, bluish-green leaves were woven into mats and baskets by the North American Potawatomi Indians.

Purple iris held special qualities for several North American tribes, including some of the Chippewa, and particularly tribes living further south in the Arizona area. It was believed to be able to protect the person smelling of it from snakes – so for instance it would be carried on the person and handled every now and then, or clothes might be fumigated with it.

Many North American Indian tribes (including the Rappahannock) recognized it as a source of medicine, as did the early settlers in North America who used the underground stem to treat gastric ailments. Both the Omaha and Ponca Indians made a root infusion to treat earache – and they also used the root for some eye problems. It was a Potawatomi remedy for skin inflammation, some of the Algonkin tribe and also the Meskwaki Indians used it on burns, it was applied by the Chippewa tribe to swellings, and the Micmac Indians and some of the Algonkin put it on wounds. Sores were also treated with it by the Ponca, Meskwaki and Omaha Indians. It was a remedy for some lung disorders and colds among the Meskwaki tribe, and authorities note that the Iroquois used it for treating various period problems, blood disorders and hay fever. The Iroquois (and the Creek and some of the Cree Indians) are also said to have taken it as a purgative. It was used by some of the Cree, as well as the Delaware, for various liver ailments. The Delaware prescribed it for kidney problems, venereal disease and rheumatism too. The Chippewa and some of the Delaware tribe took it for tuberculosis. Both the Montagnais and

Mohican tribes used it to treat pain, while the Malecite and Micmac Indians looked upon it as a remedy for sore throats, and the Micmac and Penobscot tribes took it for cholera. Medicinally, herbalists used it to treat liver disorders, tuberculosis, fluid retention, some venereal diseases, bruises and sores. Although it is no longer included in the United States pharmacopoeia it is still used in folk medicine, particularly as a blood purifier.