

*Isatis tinctoria*

[Synonyms : *Isatis canescens*, *Isatis littoralis*, *Isatis taurica*]

**WOAD** is a biennial or perennial. Native to eastern Europe (particularly southern Russia) it has many tiny, bright yellow flowers.

It is also known as Asp-of-Jerusalem, *Boryt barvířský* (Czech), Common dyer's weed, *Deutscher Indigo* (German), Dyer's weed, Dyer's woad, *Färberwaid* (German), *Farve-vajd* (Danish), *Guéde* (French), Isatan, *Llysiaw'r Lliw* (Welsh), Wad, *Waid* (German), Wood, *Vejde* (Swedish), and *Vouéde* (French).

Warning – the plant is poisonous and must not be taken internally unless under the supervision of a qualified practitioner.

In Britain woad is considered to be endangered in the wild.

*Tinctoria* is derived from Latin *tinctus* (dyed, stained, tinged) meaning 'used in dyeing'.

Woad was known to the ancient Greeks and to the Romans and was used by them for medicinal purposes.

The ancient Britons prepared the dye obtained from a paste of the leaves to paint their bodies blue in order to frighten the enemy. As the plant was once used medicinally to encourage the healing of wounds and ulcers (as well as to stop bleeding) this 'paint' will also have helped to heal the wounds received in battle. The Romans are said to have first seen the Britons covered in the dye. According to the Roman natural historian, Pliny (23-79), young girls and women used the woad to colour themselves before attending sacrifices naked. During the Roman occupation it was cultivated in both Britain and France (and later in what is now Germany). By Saxon times the plant had become less common and it had to be imported into Britain for dyeing the homespun cloth. It was often combined with other dyes to produce different colours, such as the renowned 'Saxon green' (which conjures up scenes from the English legends of Robin Hood and his merry men in Sherwood Forest). But over the following centuries its widespread use became so great (and thus its economic importance) that national controls were imposed from the mid-13<sup>th</sup> Century. In England Elizabeth I (1533-1603) decreed in 1577 that severe penalties would be imposed if the competing foreign indigo (that was being traded by the Dutch from India) were to be imported into the Country. In Germany Nuremberg dyers had to take an annual oath that indigo (*Indigofera tinctoria*) would not be used there – and the French declared that anyone caught importing indigo would be liable for the death penalty. Woad was not only used to dye cloth but also Oriental carpets as its colour does not easily fade in sunlight.

If some English place names are anything to go by woad must have been a highly regarded plant in past centuries. Apparently some such as Waddon in Dorset and Wadborough in Worcestershire refer to 'woad hills' as they are derived from an Anglo-Saxon word *wad*, while Glastonbury in Somerset (known today worldwide among younger people for its annual music festival) is said to come from an old Celtic word *glasto* meaning 'a place where woad grows'.

Some authorities have suggested that one of the modern descriptions of somebody feeling miserable ie. they have 'the blues', could be traced back to an alleged 17<sup>th</sup> Century turn of phrase

the deep woad of intense displeasure which may actually have arisen in reference to the smell of the dyeing process. In the previous Century the smell had been sufficient to encourage Elizabeth I of England to impose stiff penalties for anybody who was caught processing the plant within a five-mile radius of her estates.

It was just over 150 years ago that indigo (extracted from the subtropical *Indigofera* species) ousted woad in Europe as the main source of a blue dyestuff after more than 2,000 years. And in little more than a further 150 years from then indigo itself was to be superseded by synthetic aniline dyes in the early 20th Century. The last two woad mills to survive anywhere in the world were in Lincolnshire in England and these shut down in the early 1930s. The last British 'waddy' (the name given to the men and women involved in woad processing, particularly those in East Anglia) died in 1982.

Today apart from historical fascination the only use the plant is put to is in dyeing as a home craft as it produces a more permanent blue colour than indigo. To do this the leaves need to be sun-dried, ground into a paste and then left in the air to ferment. This is an extremely, offensively smelly task that is illustrated effectively by the prohibition during Tudor times on the process being carried out within range of any royal palace in England. The dye is finally obtained by infusing cakes of the fermented woad in limewater.

Medicinally, herbalists used to recommend woad as an ointment for treating ulcers and inflammation, and as an aid to stem bleeding from wounds. In China and eastern India the leaves and root are used as an antibiotic for treating a wide range of ailments, including those resulting in swollen glands, high fevers, diphtheria and hepatitis.