

Lactuca virosa

[Synonyms : *Lactuca scariola*]

GREAT LETTUCE is an annual or biennial. Native to central and southern Europe it has many small, pale yellow flowers.

It is also known as Acrid lettuce, Bitter lettuce, *Gifflattich* (German), *Giftsalat* (German), *Giftsallat* (Swedish), Greater prickly lettuce, Green endive, *Gwylaeth Gryf-arogl* (Welsh), *Hassa salvagga* (Maltese), Hemlock lettuce, *Kahu* (Urdu), Lactucarium, Lettuce, Lettuce opium, *Locika jedovatá* (Czech), Opium lettuce, Poison lettuce, Prickly lettuce, *Rohtosalaatti* (Finnish), Sleepwort, *Stinksalat* (German), Strong-scented lettuce, Wild lettuce, and Wild opium.

Warning – the latex can irritate the eyes and excessive intake can be poisonous. The plant should not be used medicinally unless under the supervision of a qualified practitioner. It can be poisonous for some animals.

Virosa is Latin (stinking, fetid, poisonous).

The ancient Egyptians dedicated the great lettuce to their god, Min, in his capacity as god of fertility and vegetation and protector of crops.

For the Hebrews the great lettuce represents the coming of Spring and in turn the perpetual renewal of life and unceasing hope of human atonement. It is said to be one of the five bitter herbs that the Jews are required to eat during the Feast of Passover.

Both Greek and Roman mythology make reference to the plant. For the Greeks, Aphrodite laid the dead Adonis on a bed of great lettuce leaves, and Hera was said to have conceived Hebe after eating great lettuce. The Greek lyric poet, Sappho, who was born in about 650 BC on the island of Lesbos, was also celebrated in a relevant legend. According to this in middle age she fell in love with the young boatman, Phaon. She saw him after he had ferried Aphrodite from Lesbos to the mainland when the goddess gave him a flask of perfume in payment – a perfume that made him appear handsome and irresistible to women whenever he inhaled it. Sadly though he rejected Sappho's advances and blaming the boatman for her desolation she threw herself into the sea. But Aphrodite was looking on and she acknowledged Phaon's responsibility by transforming him into a great lettuce.

Its soporific and medicinal qualities were known both to the ancient Greeks and to the Romans. The 2nd Century Greek physician Claudius Galenus, or Galen (c.130-c.201), recommended a decoction of great lettuce to aid sleep and referred to the plant as the 'herb of the wise'. Initially the Romans believed great lettuces counteracted the effects of wine and for this reason they are said to have served them at banquets. Augustus Caesar (63 BC-14 AD), who founded the Roman Empire in 27 BC, was so convinced that his recovery from a dangerous illness was due to taking great lettuce that he built an altar to it and also erected a statue in the plant's honour. However towards the Empire's end great lettuces' advantages appear to have been doubted by some of the more fashionable Romans who by then despised the plant and considered it only suitable for consumption by those lower down the social scale. It would appear that Marcus Gavius Apicius (1st Century), the Roman nobleman and gourmet who is associated with the world's first known book of recipes, *Of Culinary Matters*, must have been in the vanguard of this movement as he claimed that great lettuce was indigestible.

It was probably the Romans who introduced the great lettuce to England. There the Anglo-Saxons christened it 'sleepwort' because of the plant's properties at that stage in its cultivation. However the weak sedative element found in great lettuce was being markedly reduced (ultimately to a trace of its original volume) as the bitterness in the plant was gradually bred out of it over time.

During the medieval era in Europe great lettuce was used in love potions and was believed to have magical powers.

In 1771 the dried latex (exuded by the plant from a cut stem) was introduced to medical practice and in 1799 was being called Lettuce opium. It was used to adulterate true opium (*Papaver somniferum*) and was part of a treatment for irritable coughs.

As with prickly lettuce (*Lactuca serriola*) records suggest that this plant came to be known in North America. There the Navajo Indian tribe recognized medicinal qualities and used it to ease gastroenteritis (in other words an unpleasant combination of nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea).

Medicinally, herbalists have recommended boiled great lettuce leaves for easing stomach pains, and helping the digestive system – and for those who had no trace of any respiratory problems it was believed that its juice could strengthen veins, heart and liver. It was also used to induce childbirth and (particularly in Germany) to cure fluid retention. But its greatest believed benefit was as a remedy for sleeplessness. Today it is still employed for insomnia, and can also be a sedative and treatment for bronchitis and irritable coughs. In addition it is used in homoeopathic treatment.