

Leontopodium alpinum

[Synonyms : *Gnaphalium leontopodium*]

EDELWEISS (English, German, Swedish) is a perennial. Believed to be native to the Siberian steppe (and to have spread to the European Alps during the Ice Ages), it has minute, creamy-gold flowers surrounded by a ruff of greyish white, petal-like leaves (bracts).

It is also known as Alpine snowflower, *Étoile d'argent* (French), Lady's mantle, *Leontopodo alpa* (Esperanto), Lion's foot, *Plesnivec alpínsky* (Slovak), *Plesnivec alpský* (Czech), and *Protěž alpská* (Czech).

Edelweiss is under preservation orders in some districts in the Austrian, Swiss, and Italian mountains.

Alpinum means 'alpine' ie. found above the tree line.

The flowers grow high in the European Alps and during the English Victorian era in the 19th Century it became skiers' practice to bring down a bunch of them as proof of having reached the claimed altitude. This foolhardy prank was not confined to the British – and many European skiers lost their lives pointlessly in the attempt. Despite this however the practice persisted to the point where Victorian lasses treasured their lovers' tokens as proof of courage and daring. So to ensure that the edelweiss was not picked to extinction Alpine Clubs in the German and Tyrolean areas began to impose fines on anyone caught gathering the flowers.

Bans still exist in some regions today. As a result in secluded areas, particularly in the Italian Alps, the flowers have begun to recover and are now said to carpet the ground.