

Lolium temulentum

[Synonyms : *Bromus temulentus*, *Craepalia temulenta*, *Lolium arvense*, *Lolium giganteum*, *Lolium maximum*, *Lolium speciosum*, *Lolium temulentum* var. *arvense*, *Lolium temulentum* var. *leptochaeton*, *Lolium temulentum* var. *macrochaeton*]

DARNEL is an annual or perennial grass. Native to Asia and Europe it has small flowered spikelets.

It is also known as Bearded darnel, Bearded rye-grass, Cheat, Chess, *Cizaña* (Spanish), Cokil, Darnel grass, Darnel ryegrass, *Dårrepe* (Swedish), *Drabok* (Afrikaans), Drake, Dwake, *Efrau* (Welsh), *Ivraie* (French), Ivray, *Jílek mámvý* (Czech), Juray, *Lolch* (German), Lover's steps, *Mochni* (Hindi), *Myrkkyraiheinä* (Finnish), Poison rye-grass, Rye-grass, Sturdy and ryle, Tare, and *Taumelloch* (German); and in flower language, it is said to be a symbol of vice.

Warning – the grass can be poisonous for humans and animals. It can cause symptoms of drunkenness with sickness, dizziness, diarrhoea, headache, confusion, vomiting, delirium and death. It can only be used under the supervision of a qualified practitioner.

Temulentum is Latin (drunken, intoxicated, tipsy).

The name Darnel is a corruption of an old French word *darne* meaning 'stupefied'. Darnel has been added to barley (*Hordeum*) when brewing beer to produce a particularly intoxicating brew and some authorities believe this accounts for the old common name Cheat.

Darnel has been known for thousands of years and has been recognized generally as poisonous for man and beast. [Some authorities suggest that the parable of the tares (weeds) in the Gospel according to St. Matthew in the New Testament of the *Bible* refers to darnel as the weed sown by the enemy that needed to be harvested when ripe separately from the wheat (*Triticum*).] It is still open to debate among professionals as to whether the toxic effect so often experienced is due to something in the plant itself or to a fungus for which it is a host. When accidentally included in flour the bread made from it has normally had very serious effects for anyone who eats it. Yet today in South Africa where darnel is common it seems that bread made with flour containing significant quantities of the seed is eaten regularly without negative reaction – and in India and some other countries it is still used as animal fodder. In times past it was noted that in one particular area of France an ejected tenant would maliciously sow darnel among his landlord's wheat – so much so that this became a criminal offence.

Cosmetically in 14th Century England darnel was believed to be able to dispel freckles and soften and whiten the face.

Eventually it came to the notice of some North American Indian tribes and the Pomo and Yuki included the seeds as a staple part of their diet.

It was one of the at least 36 ingredients used by Mithridates (c.132-63 BC), the 1st Century King of Pontus (northern Turkey), in a poison antidote (known as Antidotum Mithradaticum or Theriac) which he took daily to acquire an overall immunity – an important consideration if it is remembered that he gained his position of power by poisoning his opposition.

Despite its unhealthy reputation darnel has been used medicinally in the past. Both the ancient Greeks and the Romans used the seeds in treating illnesses (although they then thought

that the plant could cause blindness). Later herbalists recommended it particularly as an internal treatment for headaches, kidney and gynaecological complaints, and externally as a remedy for scurvy, leprosy sores, ringworm and gangrene. It was also believed that it could expel broken bone or splinters from flesh and to this end it was applied in a poultice on the affected area. Today it can be used in homoeopathy for treating rheumatic pain and neuralgia.