

Lythrum salicaria

[Synonyms : *Lythrum argyi*, *Lythrum salicaria* var. *gracilior*, *Lythrum salicaria* var. *mairei*, *Lythrum salicaria* var. *tomentosum*, *Lythrum salicaria* var. *vulgare*]

PURPLE-LOOSESTRIFE is a perennial. Native to western Asia and to Europe (including Britain) it has small purple flowers.

It is also known as Black blood, Blooming sally, *Blut-Weiderich* (German), *Bouquet violet* (French), Emmet's stalk, *Fackelblomster* (Swedish), Flowering sally, Foxtail, *Gemeiner Blutweiderich* (German), Grass polly, *Kattehale* (Danish), Kill weed, *Kyprej obecny* (Czech), *Kyprej vrbice* (Czech), *Llys y Milwr* (Welsh), Long purples, Loosestrife, *Lysimaque rouge* (French), Lythrum, Milk willowherb, Partyke, Purple grass, Purple lythrum, Purple willowherb, Ragged robin, Rainbow weed, *Rantakukka* (Finnish), Red Sally, Rose loosestrife, Rosy strife, Sage willow, Salicaria, *Salikario* (Esperanto), Soldiers, Spiked loosestrife, Spiked purple loosestrife, Spiked willowherb, Stray-by-the-lough, *Vrbica vrbolistá* (Slovak), *Weiderich* (German), Willow loosestrife, Willow sage, Willow strife, and Willow weed; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of pretension.

The flowers are pollinated by butterflies, long tongued bees and other insects. The seeds are dispersed on the feathers and feet of water birds.

Salicaria is derived from the genus name *Salix* meaning 'like plants in that (willow) genus'.

The plant was once used in tanning leather. In the Black and Caspian Seas fishermen have used the roots to tan their nets and other equipment.

For hundreds of years it was used as a blond hair dye.

The flowers yield an edible red dye that has been used in confectionery. The young leafy shoots were cooked and eaten as a vegetable.

Sir John Everett Millais (1829-1896), the English artist who was popular early in the 20th Century (particularly with so many Britains who were normally unfamiliar with the art world and knew of him for his painting *Bubbles* (1886) which was associated with an advertisement for a well-known brand of soap) included purple-loosestrife in his painting of *Ophelia*. Apparently he went to great trouble to find a suitable riverside site for the painting so that he could show leaves and flowers precisely. Sadly, he seems to have misunderstood Shakespeare's reference to 'long purples' in the dramatic scene in *Hamlet* presented by the vision of the drowned Ophelia garlanded and drifting down the river

There with fantastic garlands did she come,

Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,

Shakespeare and his audiences were believed to recognize 'long purples' as what we call today early-purple orchid (*Orchis mascula*) – and this provides yet one more illustration of the confusion that is often perpetuated by the common names of plants which can vary in time, fashion and locality. On the other hand it is held that Millais would have been right if he had been portraying scenes described by the 19th Century poets, the Englishman, John Clare (1793-1864) or the American, Henry Longfellow (1807-1882). In *The Village Minstrel* the former wrote

Gay long-purples with its tufty spikes;

She'd wade o'er shoes to reach it in the dyke.

While a description in Longfellow's *A Dirge* reads

Round thee blow, self-pleached deep,
Bramble roses, faint and pale,
And long purples of the dale.

The plant was introduced to North America at some stage and it came to the attention of some of the Indian tribes there, including the Iroquois who included it as an ingredient in a potion taken to ease fever. Now apparently purple-loosestrife has created havoc in eastern Canada and calls have been made there for banning the sale of any fertile varieties. It seems that native plants upon which the indigenous waterfowl and salmon depend give way to this invasive intruder and in turn it encourages vital marshes to become swampland.

Today records suggest that, purple-loosestrife is a commercial ingredient used by the cosmetics industry in face packs.

Medicinally, a diluted decoction of the flowering plant was used as an eye wash, and children were given branches to chew as it was thought it would help to strengthen weak and/or bleeding gums. The plant used also to be recommended by herbalists for healing ulcers and open wounds, and it was used internally as a remedy for diarrhoea, dysentery, fever, liver diseases and constipation.