

Orchis mascula

[Synonyms : *Dactylorhiza mascula*, *Orchis coriophora*, *Orchis glaucophylla*, *Orchis ovalis*, *Orchis pinetorum*, *Orchis signifera*, *Orchis speciosa*, *Orchis stabiana*, *Orchis vilmsii*, *Orchis wanjkowii*]

EARLY-PURPLE ORCHID is a perennial orchid. Native to Europe (including Britain), the Mediterranean and the Middle East, it has unpleasant cat-like smelling, long spurred, white-mottled, white to rich purplish-crimson flowers with sparsely dark-spotted, purple lip.

It is also known as Aaron's beard, Adam and Eve, Adder's flower, Adder's grass, Adder's mouths, Adder's tongues, Beldairy, Bloody bones, Bloody fingers, Bloody man's fingers, Blue butcher, Bog hyacinth, Bull's bag, Bull-segg, Butcher boys, Butcher flowers, Butchers, Cain and Abel, Candlesticks, Clothes pegs, Cock-flower, Cock's kame, Cowslip, Crake-feet, Crawfeet, Crawtaes, Cross-flower, Crowfoot, Crow-flower, Cuckoo-bud, Cuckoo cock, Cuckoo-flower, Cuckoo-pint, Cuckoos, Dandy goslings, Dead man's fingers, Dead man's hand, Dead man's thumb, Deil's foot, Dog stones, Ducks and drakes, Early purple orchis, Fox stones, Fried candlesticks, Frog's mouth, Gander-gause, Gandigoslings, Gethsemane, Giddy-gander, *Giglio-caprino* (Italian), Goose and goslings, Goosey-ganders, Gosling, Gossips, Grammer griggles, Gramfer-griddle-goosey-gander, Granfer goslings, Granfer griggles, Granfer grigglesticks, *Grosses Knabenkraut* (German), Hens, Hen's kames, Jessamine, Johnny cocks, Jolly soldiers, Keek legs, Keet legs, Kettle-cap, Kettle case, King-fingers, Kite's legs, Kitepan, *Kuckucksknabenkraut* (German), Lady's fingers, Locks and keys, Long purples, Lords and ladies, *Mannetjesorchis* (Dutch), *Männliches Knabenkraut* (German), *Männliche Orchis* (German), *Mannsknabenkraut* (German), *Miehenkämme* (Finnish), Orchid, Orchis, *Orchis mâle* (French), *Pain de coleuvre* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), Poison more, Poor man's blood, Priest's pintle, Ram's-horns, Red butcher, Red granfer-gregors, Red robin, Regals, Salep, *Salepeira maior* (Portuguese), *Salep misri* (Bengali), Sammy gussets, *Sangre de Cristo* (Spanish), *Sankte Pers nyckel* (Swedish), *Sankte Pers nyckelblomster* (Swedish), *Sankte Pers nycklar* (Swedish), *Satirião-macho* (Portuguese), Single castles, Single guss, Snake flower, Soldiers, Soldier's cap, Soldier's jacket, Spotted dog, Standing gussets, *Tegeirian Coch* (Welsh), *Tyndakset Gøgeurt* (Danish), Underground shepherd, *Vstavač* (Slovak), *Vstavač mužský* (Czech), Wake robin, and *Wantsenorhis* (Dutch).

Early-purple orchid is subject to protection orders in some countries.

Mascula is Latin (masculine) meaning 'a robust (not weak) species'.

The suggestive appearance of the tubers has led to many common names some of which are extremely crude. The name Adam and Eve was no doubt a cause for some ribaldry as in order to determine which was Adam and which Eve the tubers were placed in water. The one that floated was Eve and that which sank, Adam.

That same suggestive appearance ie. the two firm and limp tubers, also explains several customs practiced in past centuries. For example the celebrated 1st Century Greek physician, Pedanius Dioscorides, noted that Thessalian women believed that the larger, firm tuber (full of the following year's growth) stimulated desire (an aphrodisiac) while

the flaccid one acted as an aphrodisiac – and they served them appropriately in goat’s milk. Belief in the growing tuber’s aphrodisiacal qualities spread throughout Europe and persisted over many centuries. It was still prevalent in western Europe in the 17th Century and crossed the Atlantic to North America with the early settlers.

In the Middle Ages English country people believed that the fresh tubers were an ingredient in witches’ love philtres (and shrivelled tubers were included to stop eyes straying).

Its purple-spotted leaves also involved the plant in the Christian tradition as one of those which was said to have grown at the foot of the Cross upon which Jesus was crucified. The belief was that the leaves’ purple markings were caused by drops of Christ’s blood.

When the early-purple orchid was more common in Britain its tubers were used in the same way as arrowroot (*Maranta arundinacea*) for culinary purposes to make a sago-like (*Metroxylon sagu*) food known as salep. As however local supplies of these tubers were limited most was made from imported tubers of other *Orchis* species and some *Dactylorhiza* species. Salep was unfamiliar in western Europe until about the 15th Century and initially was strange to western European taste. In contrast it has been popular in the Middle East for centuries, especially in Turkey and Persia, and maintains its popularity in that region even today.

It is to the early-purple orchid that William Shakespeare (1564-1616) the English playwright, poet and actor/manager, makes reference when he wrote *Hamlet*. He describes ‘long purples’ as one of the flowers with which the body of Ophelia is garlanded as she drifts down the river. [Millais (1829-1896), the famous English artist, mistakenly chose banks of purple-loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) as models for the flowers in his painting of *Ophelia*.]

Today it grows in abundance in such countries as Greece, Turkey or the old Yugoslavia. Thus in countries where it is scarce many have placed the plant under a protection order and it has to be imported for medicinal use.

Medicinally, the tubers were known to the ancient Greeks and to the Arabs, and it is mentioned by the 1st Century Greek physician, Dioscorides. Early-purple orchid used to be recommended by European herbalists for treating ailments in children, convalescents and invalids, particularly if suffering from diarrhoea or fevers. The tubers were considered to be such an important part of diet that they could also be found in ships’ rations (particularly in sailing ship’s stores taken on board for long voyages. If general food supplies were getting low 1 oz. of tuber in 4 pints of boiling water was believed to be able to provide sustenance for a man for 1 day.)