

*Ornithogalum umbellatum*

[Synonyms : *Ornithogalum angustifolium*]

**STAR-OF-BETHLEHEM** is a bulbous perennial. Native to lowland Europe and the Middle East, it has small brilliant white flowers striped green outside.

It is also known as *Aglio selvatico* (Italian), *Bella di undici ore* (Italian), *Belle d'onze heures* (French), Bethlehem star, Betty-go-to-bed-at-noon, Biblical dove's dung, *Bledavka okolikata* (Slovak), Cape chinchinchee, Chinkerichee, *Dama d'undici ore* (Italian), *Dame d'onze heures* (French), *Doldiger milchstern* (German), Dove's dung, Eleven o'clock lady, *Étailes dé Bethléem* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), Garden star-of-Bethlehem, *Gewöhnlicher Dolden-Milchstern* (German), Jack-go-to-bed-at-noon, John-go-in-bed-at-noon, Lady eleven o'clock, *Latte d'uccello* (Italian), *Leche de pájaro* (Spanish), *Leite-de galinha* (Portuguese), *Morgonstjärna* (Swedish), *Morgonstjärnor* (Swedish), Morning star, Nap-at-noon, Noon peepers, One o'clock, Open and shut, *Ornithogale en ombelle* (French), Peep o' day, *Sasal* (Turkish), Pyrenees star-of-Bethlehem, *Seren Bethlehem* (Welsh), Shamefaced maiden, Six o'clock flowers, Six o'clocks, Six o'clock sleepers, Sleepy Dick, *Snědek chocholičnatý* (Czech), Snowdrops, Snowflake, Star and garters, Star flower, Star-of-Hungary, Starry eyes, Stars, *Stjärnlök* (Swedish), Summer snowflake, Sunflower, Ten o'clock, Ten o'clock lady, Twelve o'clock, *Vogelmelk* (Dutch), *Vogelmilch* (German), Wake-at-noon, White filde onion, and Wonder flower; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of purity.

The flowers open only in sunlight.

Warning – the whole plant can cause nausea and intestinal disorders.

*Umbellatum* is derived from Latin *umbella* (parasol) meaning 'bearing flattish-heads of flowers with stalks arising from one place'.

Many of its common English names reflect the flower's alleged habit of opening mid-morning and closing in mid-afternoon. The Swedish naturalist Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778) who established the modern classification of plants and animals, believed that the Dove's dung referred to in the Old Testament of the King James' version of the *Bible* (2 Kings 6:25) when describing the famine caused by the siege of Samaria was in actual fact Star-of-Bethlehem.

A variety of star-of-Bethlehem grows in Palestine and there centuries ago the dried bulb was taken to supplement food on long journeys such as the pilgrimage to Mecca. Certainly in later centuries in Europe the plant was eaten by poor people during the many famines and epidemics that swept the Continent. Whereas today it is viewed as a poisonous, inedible plant.

Apparently this beautiful flower attracted the attention of the Italian painter, sculptor, architect and engineer, Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519). A famous pen-and-ink study of the flower drawn by him in either 1505 or 1508 resides in the art collection held by the British Royal Family.

There is some argument as to when this species first appeared in Britain but there is no doubt from records that it could be found in gardens there by 1597. At some point the plant must have been introduced to North America as records show that it was familiar to the Thompson Indians who are said to have appreciated it as an ornamental plant.

Medicinally, the plant has been used in homoeopathic treatments including for some forms of cancer.

It is the birthday flower for 12<sup>th</sup> May.