

Pistia stratiotes

[Synonyms : *Apiospermum obcordatum*, *Limnonesis commutata*, *Limnonesis friedrichsthaliana*, *Pistia aegyptiaca*, *Pistia aethiopica*, *Pistia africana*, *Pistia amazonica*, *Pistia brasiliensis*, *Pistia commutata*, *Pistia crispata*, *Pistia cumingii*, *Pistia gardneri*, *Pistia horkeliana*, *Pistia leprieuri*, *Pistia linguaeformis*, *Pistia minor*, *Pistia natalensis*, *Pistia obcordata*, *Pistia occidentalis*, *Pistia schleideniana*, *Pistia spathulata*, *Pistia stratiotes* var. *cuneata*, *Pistia stratiotes* var. *linguiformis*, *Pistia stratiotes* var. *obcordata*, *Pistia stratiotes* var. *spathulata*, *Pistia texensis*, *Pistia turpini*, *Pistia weigeltiana*, *Zala asiatica*]

WATER LETTUCE is a freshwater free-floating, evergreen aquatic perennial. Native to the tropical regions it has a small greenish-white flower spike (spadix) shielded by a small greenish-white, petal-like leaf (spathe).

It is also known as *Agasata-marai* (Tamil), *Akastamara* (Telugu), *Babelka řezanovitá* (Czech), *Chauk* (Thai), *El tubbur* (Arabic), *Jalkhumbhi* (Hindi), *Kapu-kapu* (Javanese), *Kiambang* (Malay), *Kiápo* (Filipino/Tagalog), *Koddapail* (Malayalam), *Kumbhika* (Sanskrit), *Laitue d'eau* (French), *Musselblomma* (Swedish), *Ntaya* (Twi), *Pistie* (French), Pond weed, St. Lucy's plant, Shell flower, *Takapana* (Bengali), Tropical duckweed, Water bonnets, and Water houseleek.

The fibrous roots occasionally anchor in mud. The leaves have short hairs that make them water repellent, and they will lie flat on water during the day and close to a nearly vertical position at night.

Warning – all parts are poisonous. The plant juice can cause dermatitis.

Stratiotes is a Greek name for this species (water lettuce).

Authorities note that Pliny the Elder (23-79) the famous Roman natural historian, must have been familiar with water lettuce as reference is made to it in his *Historia Naturalis*.

Not only have the cooked young leaves provided a vegetable for the Chinese, one that is understood to have an initially insipid but ultimately biting taste, but authorities also note that they have provided a famine food – especially in a part of India that suffered a particularly horrendous famine in 1877-1878 which culminated in the death of over five million people. (The biting after-taste is not so surprising when one notes that the ashes of the burnt plant have provided a salt substitute.)

The leaves have offered an ingredient for pig food, especially in China. While in Java (now an Indonesian island) it is actively cultivated in fish-ponds to provide cover and encourage breeding among edible water shrimps, and small pieces of the leaves are mixed with rice for duck food. Authorities also mention that the spread of water lettuce there has enabled Hawaiian water buffalo to enjoy a variation in what might otherwise be considered a monotonous diet.

A useful quality (if correct) is its ability to absorb or disperse stains and oil. It has been alleged that, in conjunction with soap, water lettuce can remove stains from clothing. Also if the plant is soaked for a few days in an empty oil container that has been filled with water, and this liquid is then used to scrub its sides, the container will be cleaned.

In some areas for example in Hawaii (where it was introduced in about 1932 as an ornamental pond plant) water lettuce has almost become as much of an invasive nuisance as water

hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*) has in Florida. It has clogged up reservoirs and waterways in quite a few places.

Medicinally, in India the leaves are used locally in treatments for chronic skin diseases. Water lettuce has also been used to treat some period problems and has been applied externally to bruises to reduce inflammation. The leaves have also been used to treat piles (in a poultice), asthma or coughs (when mixed with rose water, *Rosa*), and dysentery (mixed with coconut milk, *Cocos nucifera*).