

Plantago lanceolata

[Synonyms : *Plantago lanceolata* var. *sphaerostachya*]

RIBWORT PLANTAIN is a biennial or perennial. Native to Europe and Asia it has tiny rusty-white flowers with protruding stamens.

It is also known as *Amourette* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Ancelée* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Baltanga* (Hindi), *Bartung* (Bengali), Baskets, *Bizbula salvagga* (Maltese), Black bent, Black boys, Black gipsies, Blackie tops, Black jacks, Black men, Black plantain, Blacksmiths, Bobbies, Bobbins, Buckhorn, Buckhorn plantain, Buck plantain, Carl doddy, Cat's cradle, *Celník hojilek* (Czech), Chimney-sweeps, Clock, Cockgrass, Cocks, Cocks and hens, Cock's head, Conkers, Conqueror-flowers, Cuckoo's bread, Curl doddy, Devil and angels, Dobber, Dog's rib, Englishman's foot, English plantain, Fechtors, Fightee-cocks, Fighting cocks, Firegrass, Fireleaf, Gipsy, Hardheads, Headman, Headsman, *Heinäratamo* (Finnish), Hen plant, He plant, Hock-cockle, Jackstraw, *Jitrocel kopinatý* (Czech), Kemps, Kempseed, Klops, Knockheads, Lamb's tail, Lamb's tongue, Lanceleaf Indianwheat, Lance-leaf plantain, Lance-leaved plantain, Lanceolate plantain, *Laukahi* (Hawaiian), Leechwort, *Llwynhidydd* (Welsh), Long plantain, Lords and ladies, Men-of-war, *Myší ouško* (Czech), Narrowleaf plantain, Narrow-leaved plantain, Niggers, Nigger's heads, *Oreille-de-lièvre* (French), Pash-leaf, Pig grass, Plantain, Plantain buckthorn, *Plantain lancéolé* (French), Quinquenervia, Ram's tongue, *Ranocel* (Czech), Rat's tails, Ribble grass, Rib grass, Ribwort, Ripple, Ripple grass, Ripple plantain, *Skorocel kopijovitý* (Slovak), *Smalblaar Plantago* (Afrikaans), Snake plantain, Soldiers, Soldier's herb, Soldier's tappie, *Spetsgroblad* (Swedish), *Spitz-Wegerich* (German), *Svartkämpar* (Swedish), Sweep's brushes, Swords and spears, Tinker-tailor grass, *Volský jazyk* (Czech), *Wegerich* (German), Wendles, and Windles.

Warning – young plants can be poisonous for livestock and can cause slight diarrhoea.

Lanceolata is derived from Latin *lancea* (lance, spear) meaning 'spear- or lance-shaped'.

Cempa was the Anglo-Saxon word for 'soldier' and this combined with an old country game common in Europe and played by children (in which they used the tough, wiry stalks to strike each other until the stalk broke) offers some explanation for the old name Kemps.

In the past in Britain (and some other European countries) it is understood that ribwort plantain was often an acceptable alternative to greater plantain (*Plantago major*) in St. John's Day rituals and in divination practices. Three stalks were stripped of flowers and placed in a left shoe which was then laid under the enquiring girl's pillow. If the stalks had blossomed the following morning her lover would become her husband.

At one time the French used to stiffen muslin and other fabrics with the gelatinous substance obtained by soaking the seeds.

The leaves which have been used as a famine food have sometimes been eaten in salads and cooked as a vegetable as well. For early settlers in Australia ribwort plantain's seeds provided an alternative to sago (*Metroxylon sagu*) for puddings.

At some point the plant reached North America. While the Mendocino Indian tribe came to value it as fodder for their cattle, Kawaiisu and Cherokee Indians put particular store on some of its medicinal qualities. The former used a leaf infusion to relieve earache, and

the latter prescribed it for various bowel disorders, dysentery and some urinary problems. The Cherokee also employed a leaf poultice to ease headaches and applied it as a wash or in a poultice to burns, insect bites and stings, snake bites, blisters and ulcers – and they used juice to ease sore eyes.

Ribwort plantain which will only grow on poor land is enjoyed by sheep and used to be cultivated specifically for them. Rabbits also like the leaves and both wild song birds and caged birds enjoy the seeds.

The stems with their flower heads played a major role in a game known variously as blackmen, carl doddies, cocks and hens, fighting cocks, hard heads, kings or knights. Reminiscent of conkers, but played under slightly different rules according to the locality, one child with his flowered stem at the ready would be matched against another similarly armed. The winner was determined by for instance holding the flower stem (and/or flower head) that remained whole for the longest time as they were struck against each other.

Medicinally, ribwort plantain leaf poultices were recommended for stemming bleeding and promoting the healing of wounds, and the seeds used to be given as a drastic purgative. Today ribwort plantain can be an ingredient in some proprietary medicines eg. cough mixtures.