

*Primula auricula*

[Synonyms : *Primula albocincta*, *Primula alpina*, *Primula balbisii*, *Primula bellunensis*, *Primula ciliata*, *Primula crenata*, *Primula lutea*, *Primula nivalis*, *Primula similis*]

**AURICULA** is a perennial. Native to the European Alps it has small very sweet-scented, mealy white-throated, bright yellow, purple or white flowers.

It is also known as *Alpen-Aurikel* (German), Auricula primrose, *Auricule* (French), *Aurikel* (German), *Aŭrikulo* (Esperanto), Baziers, Bear's ear primrose, Bear's ears, Boar's ears, Dusty miller, *Felsenaurikel* (German), *Flühblume* (German), French cowslip, Mountain cowslip, *Oreille d'ours* (French), *Prvosienka aurikule* (Czech), *Prvosienka lysá* (Czech), *Prvosienka holá* (Slovak), Snowy primrose, Tanner's apron, and *Ursorelo* (Esperanto); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of avarice (scarlet), painting, and 'wealth is not always happiness'.

*Auricula* is Latin (ear lobe) used in past centuries (particularly pre-Linnean times) for species in the *Primula* genus as a whole with reference to the shape of the leaves.

It is believed that auriculas first arrived in England with the Huguenot refugees fleeing religious persecution in about 1570. They must have gained some measure of popularity quite quickly as they were included in *The Herball* written by John Gerard (1542-1612), the English herbalist, in 1597. Across the Channel in the following Century auriculas also made an impression as they are reported as being one of the favourite flowers of the French Sun King, Louis XIV (1638-1715). He was succeeded by his great-grandson, Louis XV (1710-1774) and during his reign a book was anonymously published entitled *Traité de la Culture Parfaite de l'Oreille d'ours ou Auricole*. Then in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century a significant variation in the flower's appearance led to exhibition plants over which horticulturists and amateur gardeners enthused rapturously.

Initially any fascination with auricula development was confined to the wealthy gardener. But in the 1800s the flowers became especially popular in the English mining and silk weaving areas of Cheshire and Lancashire. In fact this interest became so great that societies were formed and exhibitions held to celebrate show plants. New colourings were introduced, exotic ingredients for fertilizers were discussed, and prizes were presented – traditionally a copper kettle. As a result of all this attention the range of colours available today is very wide.

Although Pierre Redouté (1759-1840), the French botanical painter, is most associated with roses (*Rosa*) he painted several auricula portraits (as did several other less familiar European artists). The flowers also featured in the unusual 'paper-mosaics' made by the English lady of letters, Mary Delany (1700-1788), some of which are held in the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle.

Medicinally, when the plant first reached English shores, herbalists recommended it as a remedy for headaches and in the European Alps it has been used as a cure for coughs and giddiness.