

Primula veris

[Synonyms : *Primula columnae*, *Primula cordifolia*, *Primula coronaria*, *Primula discolor*, *Primula domestica*, *Primula inflata*, *Primula legionensis*, *Primula macrocalyx*, *Primula montana*, *Primula officinalis*, *Primula pannonica*, *Primula praticola*, *Primula pyrenaica*, *Primula suaveolens*, *Primula uralensis*, *Primula velenowskyi*]

COWSLIP is a perennial. Native from central and northern Europe to Iran it has small orange-throated, deep yellow flowers.

It is also known as Artetyke, Arthritica, *Briallu Mair* (Welsh), Bedlam cowslip, Buckles, Bunch of keys, *Clef de St. Pierre* (French), Cove keys, Cowflop, Cow paigle, Carslope, Cooslop, Cower-slop, Cow pats, Cowslap, Cowslip primrose, Cowslop, Cow's mouth, Cow stripping, Cow stropple, Cow strupple, Creivel, Crewel, Cuckoo, Cuckoo buds, Culverkeys, *Dagrau Mair* (Welsh), Drelip, *Duftende* (German), *Echte Schlüsselblume* (German), Fairies' basins, Fairies' flower, Fairy bells, Fairy cups, Freckled face, *Frühlingsschlüsselblume* (German), Gallingskins, Gaskins, *Gökblomma* (Swedish), Golden drops, *Gullviva* (Finnish, Swedish), Herb Peter, *Himmelschlüsselblume* (German), *Himmelsnycklar* (Swedish), Hodrod, Holrod, Horsebuckle, *Housátka* (Czech), *Hulkravet Kodriver* (Danish), Jackanapes on horses, *Jaune coucou* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Jungfru Marie nycklar* (Swedish), *Kevätesikko* (Finnish), Keyflower, Keyre, Keys of heaven, Keys of St. Peter, Lady's bunch of keys, Lady's candlestick, Lady's fingers, Lady's keys, Lady's seal, Long legs, Luck flower, Mayflower, Milkmaidens, Oddrod, *Oxlägg* (Swedish), Our Lady's cushion, Our Lady's keys, Paggles, Pagle, Paigle, Paiglewort, Palsywort, Paralysis, Password, Peagles, Peggle, *Petrklíč* (Czech), Petty mulleins, Plumrocks, *Primavera* (Italian), *Primel* (German), *Primevère officinale* (French), *Primolo printempa* (Esperanto), *Primula* (Spanish), *Primulka* (Czech), *Prvosienka jarní* (Czech), *Prvosienka jarná* (Slovak), Racconals, *St. Pär's nycklar* (Swedish), St. Peter's herb, St. Peter's keys, St. Peter's wort, *Sankt Pers nycklar* (Swedish), *Schlüsselblumen* (German), Tisty-tosty, Tosty, *Wiesen-Schlüsselblume* (German), and Yellow star of Bethlehem; and in flower language it is also said to be a symbol of comeliness, pensiveness, rusticity, winning grace, and 'you are my divinity'.

The flowers have an apricot-like smell.

An essential oil known as Primula camphor is extracted from the flowers.

Warning – large doses can cause vomiting and diarrhoea.

It is protected in Northern Ireland under the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.

Veris means 'of the Spring' (the time of year when the plant flowers).

According to Christian tradition the cowslip emerged from the ground at the point where St. Peter dropped his keys when he heard that a duplicate key to Heaven had been made. This is said to explain the reason behind some of the European common names. On the other hand the name Cowslip is far more prosaic as it is said to have arisen through the old English *cu-sloppe* (indicating its habitat in meadows grazed by domesticated animals) and then 'cowslop'. And Palsywort came about from the use of an old country remedy known as cowslip syrup which was used for treating paralysis (palsy).

One Welsh custom for divining future husbands involved picking around sixty flower heads, stringing them together and tying them into a ball. A group of young Welsh girls would then choose one of their number to receive this important information before the cowslip ball was tossed back and forth between them all. As they threw the flower ball to each other they sang the words

Tisty tosty, tell me true
Who shall I be married to?

and the names of the eligible local lads were called out. The future husband was the man named just before the cowslip ball was dropped.

The flower also appears in literature. There are several references to it for example in the plays of the famous English bard, William Shakespeare (1564-1616). One of the most quoted must be that from *The Tempest*

Where the bee sucks, there suck I,
In a cowslip's bell I lie;
There I couch when owls do cry.

which was presented in 1611. Later that Century another English poet, John Milton (1608-1674) wove the cowslip into his *Song on May Morning*

Now the bright morning star, day's harbinger,
Comes dancing from the East, and leads with her
The flowering May, who from her green lap throws
The yellow cowslip and the pale primrose.

British superstitions included the conviction that the flowers would be red if the cowslip (or the primrose, *Primula vulgaris*) was planted upside down and the belief that the cowslip (like the primrose – or for the Germans, Solomon's-seal, *Polygonatum multiflorum*) had the ability to open caves of hidden treasure. May Day (1st May) in many parts of Britain saw the remains of pagan sacrificial rites when the flowers were scattered round the maypole. To dream of cowslips is said to presage unexpected luck.

Although the flower has been picked in the wild to the point of extinction and unsuccessful attempts were made in eastern Europe to cultivate it commercially, conservation programmes combined with the availability of many more home-grown plants have reversed its demise.

In England the flowers have long been used to make cowslip wine (which is not only considered to be palatable but also a good sedative) as well as delicate preserves, and the leaves have been picked as an ingredient in meat stuffing and in salads.

Juice from the blooms was used cosmetically in facial and general skin treatments. It was also believed that it would remove both freckles and wrinkles.

Medicinally, the cowslip was combined with linseed oil (*Linum usitatissimum*) on burns and was also used to heal wounds. A decoction of flowers was believed to be beneficial for the nervous system and today it can still be employed for its sedative qualities. In folk medicine in Europe the flowers and roots are still used in decoction to treat coughs and cause perspiration. The root used to be recommended by herbalists for treating muscular rheumatism. Today cowslip is used in homoeopathic treatments and can be an ingredient in some proprietary medicines.

It is the birthday flower for 22nd September.