

Primula vulgaris

[Synonyms : *Primula abschasica*, *Primula acaulis*, *Primula bicolor*, *Primula grandiflora*, *Primula heterochroma*, *Primula hybrida*, *Primula komarovii*, *Primula officinalis* var. *acaulis*, *Primula sibthorpii*, *Primula uniflora*, *Primula veris* var. *acaulis*, *Primula vernalis*, *Primula woronovii*]

PRIMROSE is a perennial. Native from Norway through Europe to Turkey and Iran, and from Siberia to Manchuria, it has small, pale yellow (occasionally purplish) flowers with central orange marks.

It is also known as Blue primrose, *Briallu* (Welsh), Buckie-faalie, Butter rose, Calver keys, Common primrose, Darling of April, Double English primrose, Early rose, Easter rose, English cowslip, English primrose, Fairy cups, First rose, Golden rose, Golden stars, *Jordviva* (Swedish), *Kissen-Primel* (German), Lent rose, *Maj-nycklar* (Swedish), May-floer, May spink, *Pâquerolle* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Paschaloudes* (Greek), *Pip'soles* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Primel* (German), *Primevère* (French), *Primolo sen-tiga* (Esperanto), *Prvosienka bezlodyžná* (Czech), *Prvosienka* (Slovak), *Sabhaircin* (Irish Gaelic), Simmerin, *Sleutelbloem* (Dutch), *Sobhrach* (Scottish Gaelic), *Stängellose Schlüsselblume* (German), *Stengellose Schlüsselblume* (German), *Storblomstret Kodriver* (Danish), and True English primrose; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of 'believe me', early youth, early youth and sadness, fears, forsaken, inconstancy, innocence, lovers' doubts, neglected merit (purplish), sadness, welcome, and youth.

The flowers have a delicate mossy scented smell.

Warning – primrose is considered to be potentially poisonous by some authorities. This may of course be reference to 'primula sensitivity' that can manifest itself as a dermatitis.

Primrose is a protected species in the wild in Northern Ireland to the extent that under the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 no wild plants can be offered for sale.

Vulgaris means 'common'.

Prima rosa from which the name Primrose is derived means the 'first rose' (to appear in the year) probably because for many northern Europeans it is one of the awaited symbols of Spring.

It is apparent from records that man has always gathered the primrose extensively, less for medicinal purposes than for the preparation of preserves, wines and cosmetics – as much as for the sheer joy that the flowers themselves can provide.

The primrose has attracted many superstitions in Britain. Some believed it was unlucky to take less than 13 primroses inside the house as the number of eggs hatched by the hens (or geese in some localities) in the following year would be indicated by the fewer number of flowers. Not only was the primrose used as a love oracle (and in this connection a six-petalled primrose would seem to have been of some significance) but also for children eating the flower meant the likelihood of being able to see fairies. The primrose was believed to be able to give protection from witches. This goes some way to explain why some cowsheds were hung with the flowers on May Day (1st May). And as with the cowslip (*Primula veris*) (or for the Germans Solomon's-seal, *Polygonatum multiflorum*) the primrose was also considered to have the power to open caves of hidden treasure –

but once used its power was lost. One other superstition shared with the cowslip was the belief that the flower would be red if the primrose was planted upside down.

English literature is strewn with references to the delightful Spring flower – although it would seem that some are a little confusing as the word ‘primrose’ has not only been used in the past in England for the name of another flower but in the 15th Century it was also used sometimes for instance to imply ‘excellence’. Authorities on the periods in question assure us however that the following references are to what we know today as the primrose. The poet, John Gower (c.1325-1408) refers to the flower in his *Confessio Amantis*.

His stone and herbe as saith the scole
Ben Achates and Primerole.

While in *The Milleres Tale* his peer, Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1345-1400) wrote

Hir schos were laced on hir legges hyghe
Sche was a primerole, a piggesneyhe
For any lord have liggyng in his bedde,
Or yet for any gode yeman to wedde.

The Shepheardes Calender, which is one of the earlier important works of Edmund Spenser (c.1552-1599) provides an illustration of the confusion mentioned above. In *Februarie* he writes of the ‘excellence’ of the briar

Was not I planted of thine own hande
To bee the primrose of all thy lande;
With flow’ring blossomes to furnish the prime
And scarlet berries in sommer time?

and in *April* he refers to the plant itself –

..... and primroses greene
Embellish the sweete violet.

The playwright and poet, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) mentions the flower in several plays including *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in which Hermia recalls

And in the wood, where often you and I
Upon faint primrose-beds were wont to lie,
Emptying our bosoms of their counsel sweet,

and in the Introductory song of *Two Noble Kinsmen* on which he is believed to have collaborated with John Fletcher (1579-1625)

Primrose, first-born child of Ver
Merry spring-time’s harbinger,
With her bells dim,

The brothers Phineas (1582-1650) and Giles (c. 1588-1623) Fletcher both include the primrose in their works. The elder in

The primrose lighted new her flame displays,
And frights the neighbour hedge with fiery rays.
And here and there sweet primrose scattered.

while the younger wrote

Every bush lays deeply perfumed
With violets; the wood’s late wintry head,
Wide flaming primroses set all on fire.

John Milton (1608-1674) associates the primrose with both joy and death. The former is illustrated in an extract from *Song on May Morning*

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

and the latter can be seen in *On the Death of a Fair Infant*

O fairest flower, no sooner blown but blasted,
Soft silken primrose fading timeleslie;
Summer's chief honour, if thou hadst outlasted
Bleak winter's force that made thy blossoms drie.

At one time it was customary in Suffolk to use primroses to decorate graves and unconnected with any traditional significance the action might have had it has been recorded that Queen Victoria sent a wreath of primroses (his favourite flower) to the funeral of Disraeli (1804-1881), who was not only one of Britain's famous statesmen but also a novelist. In 1833 two years after Disraeli's death an association for Conservative propaganda (a political party) was established in his memory and was called the Primrose League and Primrose Day was celebrated on 19th April, the date of Disraeli's death.

One modern British custom that takes place on Maundy Thursday, the day before Good Friday in the Christian calendar, recalls the days when certain herbs were carried in nosegays as a protection against disease (particularly plague) and noxious odours. The Maundy money, usually a specially minted silver penny for every year of the monarch's age, is distributed by the sovereign (today the Queen) to a similar number of elderly people. She herself is presented with a traditional nosegay that customarily contains daffodils (*Narcissus pseudonarcissus*), primroses, rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*), thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*), violets (*Viola odorata*) and hoary stock (*Matthiola incana*).

In the kitchen in England the leaves used to be boiled as a green vegetable. Primrose was also found as an ingredient in jams, as well as in a very old pudding that used the ground flowers with rice (*Oryza*), almonds (*Prunus dulcis* var. *dulcis*), honey and saffron (*Crocus sativus*).

Medicinally, its usage goes back centuries. Apparently the Roman natural historian, Pliny (23-79), is thought to have believed it to be virtually a panacea. Herbalists once recommended the plant for the treatment of arthritic and rheumatic problems, jaundice (surely overtones of the Doctrine of Signatures), gout, paralysis and nervous disorders, and also in ointments for wounds. In more recent times in North America a tincture of the flowering plant was found to be a remedy for insomnia and restlessness. But today it is rarely used.

It is the birthday flower of 7th May, and is associated with the month of February.