

Ranunculus acris

[Synonyms : *Erectus acris*, *Ranunculus acer*, *Ranunculus acris* var. *latisectus*, *Ranunculus pratensis*]

BUTTERCUP is a perennial. Native to Europe and Asia it has small glossy, bright yellow (occasionally pale yellow or white) flowers.

It is also known as Acrid buttercup, Acrid crowfoot, Bachelor's buttons, Bassinet, Biting crowfoot, Blister cup, Blister flower, Blister plant, Blisterweed, *Blodyn Ymenyn* (Welsh), *Botton d'oro* (Italian), *Bouton d'or* (French, French-Canadian), Burrwort, Butter and cheese, Butterbump, Butterchurn, Buttercrease, Butter cress, Butter-daisy, Butter flower, Butter rose, Caltrops, Clovewort, Common buttercup, Common meadow buttercup, Cowslip, Crazy, Crazy bet, Crazy weed, Creeping buttercup, Crowflower, Crowfoot, Crowfoot buttercup, Crowtoe, Cuckoobuds, Cuckoo flower, Dalecup, Dellcup, Dewcup, Dillcup, Fairies' basins, Field buttercup, *Fleur des Alpes* (French), Gilcup, Gildcup, Giltycup, Glennies, Globe amaranth, Gold balls, Gold buttons, Goldcrap, Gold cup, Goldencup, Golden knop, Gold knots, Goldweed, Goldy, Golland, Gowan, *Grenouillette* (French), Horse gold, *Iskerník prudký* (Slovak), *Jaskier ostry* (Polish), Kingcup, King's clover, King's cob, King's knob, Lady's slipper, Lawyerweed, Marybuds, Maybuds, Meadowbloom, Meadow buttercup, Meadow crowfoot, Meadow cup, *Nittyleinikki* (Finnish), Old man's buttons, Paigles, *Pi de yon à rachaines* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Pipot* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Pryskyřník prudký* (Czech), Queen's button, *Ranuncolo dei prati* (Italian), *Renoncule âcre* (French), *Renoncule bouton d'or* (French), *Scharfer Hahnenfuss* (German), *Scherpe Boterbloem* (Dutch), Sharp cock foot, Sitsicker, *Smörblomma* (Swedish), Soldier buttons, *Solöga* (Swedish), Tall buttercup, Tall crowfoot, Tall field buttercup, Teacups, Upright buttercup, Upright crowfoot, Upright meadow crowfoot, Water crowfoot, Water milfoil, Yellow bachelor's buttons, Yellow caul, Yellow creams, Yellow crees, Yellowcup, Yellow daisy, Yellow gollan, Yellow gowan, Yellow pileweed, Yellow pilewort, Yellows, and Yellowweed; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of childishness, 'desire for riches', immortality, ingratitude, mockery, riches, spite, unchangeable, and unfading love.

The flowers are pollinated by short-tongued insects.

Warning – the sap of the fresh plant is poisonous. It can cause a burning sensation in mouth and throat, abdominal pain and diarrhoea. The bruised plant can cause skin blisters. The fresh plant can be poisonous for some animals which are likely to eat it only when food is scarce.

Buttercup has a similar appearance to the lesser celandine (*Ranunculus ficaria*) that has 8 to 12 petals and does not flower through the Summer like the buttercup.

Acris is derived from Latin *acer* (keen, pungent, sharp, cutting) meaning 'sharp or bitter-tasting'.

The buttercup used to be thought able to cause madness which accounts for the name Crazy.

On the one hand it seems that Pliny the Elder (23-79) made reference to an infusion of 'laughing leaves' as a bringer of strange visions and much laughter while on the other the root had a reputation in some parts of Europe as a cure for insanity if handled in accordance with a specific ritual.

The gentle British Summer tradition of making daisy chains has been practised for hundreds of years. One other long-practised custom that has persisted to the present day is that of determining who likes butter. Modern children will still hold a buttercup under each other's chins to see if the desired yellow reflection appears on the skin indicating enjoyment of the dairy spread. A custom once common in Ireland used to take place on May Day. Irish farmers rubbed their cows' udders with buttercup flowers in the hope of increasing the milk yield.

On a more serious note authorities point out that the buttercup's presence is an indicator of poorly drained heavy soil.

An English poet, Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), who served in the First World War mentions the buttercup in his poem entitled *Spring Offensive*.

Hour after hour they ponder the warm field -
And the far valley behind, where the buttercup
Had blessed with gold their slow boots coming up,
Where even the little brambles would not yield,
But clutched and clung

It was introduced to North America accidentally by European colonists probably in the 16th Century and it came to be familiar to many North American Indian tribes. The Cherokee cooked and ate the leaves like greens and several tribes found the plant to be of benefit medicinally despite its poisonous sap. Micmac, Montagnais and Abnaki Indians all used it to ease headaches, and the Iroquois tribe applied it in poultices applied to the chest to ease pain. They also turned to it as a remedy for diarrhoea, blood diseases and colds. The Cherokee prescribed it as a sedative, gargled with it to soothe sore throats and used it (like the Bella Coola) for treating various skin disorders.

Medicinally, herbalists used the juice in the leaves to remove warts, and they recommended a plaster of the roots to give immediate relief to concentrated, violent headaches. (In 1794 a Mr. Plunkett used the fresh leaves in what was at that time a celebrated cure for cancer.)

It is the birthday flower for 18th September.