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Roccella tinctoria

[Synonyms : *Lacca caerulea*, *Lacca musica*, *Roccella phycopsis*, *Roccella pygmaea*]

LITMUS is a lichen. Native to Asia, Africa, Australia and the Mediterranean (particularly Canary and Cape Verde Islands), it has warty drab-coloured stems.

It is also known as Archil, Cudbear, Dyer's weed, Lacmus, Lichen, Orchella weed, Orseille, Persio, Rock moss, Turnsole, and Vulparaiso weed.

Tinctoria is derived from Latin *tinctus* (dyed, stained, tinged) meaning 'used in dyeing'.

Although records indicate that litmus was employed long before the 1st Century at about that time the plant's popularity seems to have gone into a decline. Then around 1300 a Florentine named Frederigo (who later became the head of the Oricellari family) rediscovered the plant's attributes. (The dye known as *Orseille* or *Persio* was named after the family.)

Aside from the fact that the lichen is the source of a dye used for silk and wool, as well as for colouring alcoholic drinks eg. wines, liqueurs, and food eg. bottled sauces, it would probably be most familiar to many past schoolchildren in its role in litmus paper for testing acids (it turns red) and alkalies (it turns blue) . The infusions with which the papers are steeped are primarily produced in the Netherlands which has dominated this particular product for some long time and still guards the secret of processing the lichen closely.