

Sempervivum tectorum

[Synonyms : *Sempervivum arvernense*, *Sempervivum densum*]

HOUSE-LEEK is a succulent evergreen perennial. Native to southern Europe it has many rose-coloured or dull pale reddish-purple.

It is also known as Aaron's rod, *Artichaut-de-muraille* (French), Ayegreen, Ayrón, Bullock's eye, Bullock's plant, *Bywfyth* (Welsh), Common houseleek, *Dach-Hauswurz* (German), *Donnersbart* (German), Earwort, *Echte Hauswurz* (German), Foose, Fuets, Fullen, *Gemeine Hauswurz* (German), *Hauswurz* (German), Healing blade, Healing leaf, Hens and chickens, Hockerie-topner, Hollick, Homewort, Housegreen, Huslock, *Ilysiâu Pentai* (Welsh), Imbroke, *Jaune barbe* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Jombarbe* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Joubarbe des toits* (French), Jove's beard, Jupiter's beard, Jupiter's eye, Liveforever, *Luibh an Toiteán* (Irish Gaelic), Mallow-rock, *Netřesk střešní* (Czech), *Netřesk zední* (Czech), Old-man-and-woman, Poor jan's leaf, Roof foil, Roof houseleek, *Saiao-curto* (Portuguese), St. George's beard, St. Patrick's cabbage, *Sempre-viva-dos-telliados* (Portuguese), *Semprevivo* (Italian), Sengreen, *Siempreviva mayor* (Spanish), Silgreen, Singreen, *Skalnica strechová* (Slovak), Sungreen, Syngreen, Syphelt, *Taklök* (Swedish), Thor's beard, Thunderbeard, Thunder plant, Thunderwort, Welcome home husband however drunk, and Welcome-husband-though-never-so-late; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of domestic economy, domestic industry, and vivacity.

This is a protected species in some areas.

Tectorum is derived from Latin *tecti-* (cover, roof, shelter) meaning 'of roofs or growing on house roofs'.

In the English names '.....leek' comes from an Anglo-Saxon word for plant *leac*.

The house-leek was familiar in classical times. The noted Greek philosopher, Theophrastus (c.372-c.287 BC) refers to the plants in his writings and Pedanius Dioscorides, the famous 1st Century Greek physician, mentions that the house-leek can be seen growing on roof tiles.

For hundreds of years it has been closely associated with thunder and lightning. The Romans believed that it was a gift from Jupiter to whom it was dedicated and similarly the early Scandinavians dedicated it to their god of thunder, Thor. The Romans grew it in courtyard urns and looked upon it as a protection from lightning, fire and evil spirits eg. as a form of 'home insurance'. When Charlemagne (747-814), who was king of the Franks and Christian emperor of the west, came to power he carried this one stage further. Under an edict he required that within his Empire all landlords must plant house-leeks on their rooftops – presumably with this 'insurance' in mind.

This conviction continued into the Middle Ages – and is still alive even today. The house-leek as in earlier times could then (and can still now) be seen growing on house tops and cottage roofs to repel lightning, ward off evil spirits and illness, and prevent fire. In Wales particularly this confidence in the plant was extended to ensuring the prosperity of the inmates. While in the English county of Wiltshire country-folk there not only objected to anyone picking the house-leek off the roof but were also certain that even a flower plucked by a stranger could bring death to those in the dwelling below. In other

areas the plant was not even allowed to flower for fear of the consequences. The lightning protection may not be quite as fanciful as it would seem as it would appear that the leaves can dissipate atmospheric electric charges.

The hardiness and fortitude of the house-leek is perhaps most strikingly illustrated in a past custom that involved winding it through a frame of wire or wood to serve as a living firescreen.

A further proof of its general high regard is provided in the fact that this was one of the plants introduced to North America by some of the early settlers in the 16th and 17th Centuries. There Cherokee Indians came to use it medicinally and applied it, wilted, in poultices to corns. They also used the juice to ease earache.

Medicinally, although its healing properties are not as powerful as those of aloe (*Aloe vera*) there are similarities between them. In the past however herbalists also recommended house-leek for treating headaches, ringworm and in the Netherlands dysentery. They also applied it to burns, scalds, stings, ulcers, skin diseases and ailments of the eye and ear. It was used to remove warts and corns too. The chewed fresh leaves were said to cure toothache. The juice boiled in milk was drunk as a thirst quencher during fever and was also used to treat the inflammatory skin complaint, erysipelas, particularly during one period when the problem reached epidemic proportions in one part of Europe. Today like aloe the juice from the bruised fresh leaves can be applied in a poultice to burns and stings.