

Silphium laciniatum

COMPASS PLANT is a perennial. Native to central North America it has daisy-like yellow-petalled and -centred flowers.

It is also known as *Chashishila* (Dakota North American Indian), Cut-leaf siliphium, Gopher plant, Gum plant, Gum weed, *Kahts-tawas* (Pawnee North American Indian), Pilot plant, Pilot weed, Polar plant, Ragged cup, Rosin weed, *Shokawa-hu* (Winnebago North American Indian), Turpentine plant, Turpentine weed, and *Zha-pa* (Omaha and Ponca North American Indian).

Laciniatum is derived from Latin *lacer* (torn, mangled) meaning ‘fringed or very deeply cut, torn or slashed into narrow divisions’.

The name Compass plant reflects a theory still debated among some botanists that invariably the plant holds its leaf edges in a north-south plane.

Both the Omaha and the Ponca North American Indian tribes would never camp in an area abounding with compass plant as they were convinced it attracted lightning – yet if they, or the Dakota, Winnebago or Pawnee tribes were caught up in an electric storm they burnt the root in the belief that its smoke would deflect any lightning.

The plant (particularly the upper part of the stem) exudes a resinous gum and this was once used by North American Indian tribes, especially the children of the Pawnee, Dakota, Winnebago, Ponca and Omaha as the source of a chewing gum.

The root was used by several Indian tribes including the Ponca, Dakota and Omaha to treat their horses.

Pawnee North American Indians also used the root in human medicine as a tonic– and Meskwaki Indians used it to cause vomiting.

Compass plant was introduced to many people for the first time through the celebrated American poet, Henry Longfellow (1807-1882) in his poem *Evangeline*, otherwise known as *Tale of Acadie*.

‘Patience!’ the priest would say;
Look at this vigorous plant that lifts its head from the meadow,
See how its leaves are turned to the north, as true as the magnet;
This is the compass-flower, that the finger of God has planted
Here in the houseless wild, to direct the traveller’s journey
Over the sea-like, pathless, limitless waste of the desert.
Such in the soul of man is faith. The blossoms of passion,
Gay and luxuriant flowers, are brighter and fuller of fragrance,
But they beguile us, and lead us astray, and their odour is deadly.
Only this humble plant can guide us here, and hereafter
Crown us with asphodel flowers, that are wet with the dews of
nepenthe.’

Medicinally, the plant has been used to treat various respiratory disorders.