

Tanacetum vulgare

[Synonyms : *Chrysanthemum tanacetum*, *Chrysanthemum vulgare*, *Tanacetum boreale*, *Tanacetum crispum*, *Tanacetum umbellatum*, *Tanacetum vulgare* var. *boreale*, *Tanacetum vulgare* var. *crispum*]

TANSY is an invasive perennial. Native to Asia and Europe it has button-like heads of tiny scented, golden yellow flowers.

It is also known as *Aniceto* (Italian), *Atanasia* (Spanish), *Atanásia-das-boticas* (Portuguese), Bachelor's buttons, *Barbotine* (French), Bitter buttons, *Boerenwormkruid* (Dutch), Buttons, Button weed, Cheese, Common tansy, Daisy, *Daneta* (Italian), Double tansy, English cost, *Frangia* (Italian), Garden tansy, Ginger, Ginger plant, Golden buttons, *Herbe amère* (French), *Hierba lombriguera* (Spanish), Hindheel, Hindheel, Immortality, Immortality, Joynson's remedy, Parsley fern, *Pietaryrtti* (Finnish), *Rainfarn* (German), *Reinfahren* (German), *Renfana* (Swedish), St. Athanasius' flower, Scented daisies, Scented fern, *Sôglucan otu* (Turkish), Stinking elshander, Stinking Willie, *Tanacato commune* (Italian), *Tanaceto* (Italian, Portuguese, Spanish), *Tanaceto ordinara* (Esperanto), *Tanaisie* (Creole, French), *Tanaisie vulgaire* (French), *Tanasia* (Italian), *Tanclys* (Welsh), *Tenaisie* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *T'naisie* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), Traveller's rest, *Vratič obecný* (Czech), *Vratič obyčajný* (Slovak), *Vurtika* (Greek), Weebo, *Wurmkraut* (German), and Yellow buttons; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of courage, 'I declare war against you' (wild), and resistance.

The flowers are pollinated by various insects including bees and hover-flies.

A greenish essence can be obtained from the flowers by distillation.

Warning – without the supervision of a qualified practitioner tansy should only be used externally. Large doses or prolonged intake can be poisonous and can affect the central nervous system. It can cause cramps, thirst, restlessness, dizziness, trembling and numbness in limbs, chest pains, delirium, vertigo, general paralysis and death. It should not be taken internally during pregnancy. Handling the plant can cause dermatitis and cosmetic use should be avoided on sensitive skin.

Vulgare means 'common'.

Classical legend tells how with the help of a drink made from tansy a beautiful young man, Ganymede, was made immortal so that he could serve as cupbearer to Zeus.

Some ancient cultures recognizing its antiseptic properties used the herb for embalming. Tansy has also seen service as a strewing herb.

As protection for meat tansy leaves used to be rubbed over its surface to deter flies (and also on corpses to repel worms). In more recent times it has been employed as a disinfectant and an insecticide. It used to be found on windowsills as a fly deterrent and was placed in bedding – and it will also repel ants, fleas, and moths. Some beetles, including the Colorado potato beetle, can be deterred by a tea made from the leaves.

The leaves can produce a green dye.

Tansy is claimed to have been one of the favoured plants of Carolus Magnus Charlemagne (747-814), who was king of the Franks and Christian emperor of the West. He is said to

have encouraged its growth in European monastery gardens and in that of St. Gall in Switzerland the plant has flourished for over 1,000 years.

It was first dedicated by the Christians to St. Athanasius (c. 296-373) and later to the Virgin Mary. At one time the English clergy (including archbishops and bishops) played handball at Easter with male members of their congregation and at the end of the match the winners received tansy cakes (made from a mixture of eggs and young leaves).

On Easter Sunday be the pudding seen,
To which the tansy lends her sober green.

These cakes (or pancakes) were thought to cleanse the body following the restricted Lenten diet that they had all been subjected to in the previous weeks (it would have included a lot of salted fish). By the mid-18th Century this practice eventually merged into symbolism of the bitter herbs eaten at the Jewish Passover and the tansy cakes came to be eaten on Easter Sunday. The leaves were also one of the flavouring ingredients in a rich, custardy Lenten and Easter pudding known as 'Tansy' which according to one contemporary writer was 'a nauseous dish'.

A traditional Irish sausage made from sheep's blood and known as 'Drisheen' included tansy amongst the ingredients. Some authorities suggest that flowers and young leaves can be used as an alternative to sage (*Salvia officinalis*) as flavouring in savoury dishes.

Today some authorities claim that tansy is used in The Faeroes for flavouring schnaps.

One superstition that relates to tansy states that it is dangerous to plant as a death in the family could follow.

Tansy was introduced to North America by the early European settlers who had come to rely upon it medicinally in the land of their birth. It was enthusiastically taken up by many North American Indian tribes primarily as a source of medicine (although hunters in some of the Chippewa tribe included the flowers as an ingredient in a particularly unpleasant-smelling mixture they smoked to attract deer). It was taken by the Mohican Indians and some of the Delaware to calm stomach upsets, the Shoshoni took it for diarrhoea, and the Micmac and Malecite tribes both turned to it for treating kidney problems. The Iroquois used it for easing colds and headaches, while Chippewa Indians valued it as a treatment for fever and sore throats. Tansy was used to ease pain by the Shinnecock, Cherokee and Iroquois tribes, Chippewa Indians prescribed it for some period disorders, and both the Malecite and Micmac tribes used it for contraception. It was a tonic for the Cherokee – and Mohican Indians took it to enhance the appetite. The Cherokee also used it for worms, it was applied to some skin problems by the Shoshoni, and Iroquois Indians used it to heal wounds. While Nanticoke and Chippewa Indians took it to cause sweating, the Paiute tribe prescribed it to induce vomiting, and it was also used by the Cheyenne for ear problems and dizziness.

Not least the plant was also valued in North American Indian veterinary medicine as the Malecite tribe used it for their horses.

The essence is a commercial ingredient for the drinks industry eg. Chartreuse, and it is occasionally used by the perfumery industry too. Tansy is also used in the West in veterinary medicine.

Medicinally, herbalists recommended tansy for treating kidney disorders, gout, fever and worms. In Scotland gout has been treated with a preserve of tansy roots in honey or sugar. While for some authorities it is supposed to have gained a name for allegedly preventing miscarriages, others report that tansy was used to promote abortions and more often than not was the cause of the expectant mother's death. It was an ingredient in treatments for skin diseases, sprains, wounds and rheumatism. Today the fresh plant is used in homoeopathic treatments.

It is the birthday flower for 23rd February.

