

Valeriana officinalis

[Synonyms : *Valeriana baltica*, *Valeriana exaltata*, *Valeriana excelsa*, *Valeriana officinalis* subsp. *baltica*, *Valeriana officinalis* subsp. *exaltata*, *Valeriana palustris*]

COMMON VALERIAN is a perennial. Native to western Asia and to Europe it has tiny pale pink or white flowers.

It is also known as All-heal, Amantilla, *Baldrian* (German), *Baldrián* (Czech), *Billioltan* (Hindi), Black elder, Blessed herb, Bouncing Bess, Capon's tail, Cat's love, Cat's valerian, Cat trail, *Čertikus* (Czech), Cut-finger, Cut heal, Cut-leaf, Drunken sailor, Drunken slots, *Echter Arznei-Baldrian* (German), English valerian, Filaera, Fragrant valerian, Garden heliotrope, Garden valerian, *Gemeiner Baldrian* (German), George's herb, German valerian, Great wild valerian, Hardy heliotrope, Heal-all, Heliotrope, Herb Bennett, *Herbe aux chats* (French), Hercules all-heal, *Kalavala* (Marathi), *Kočičí kořen* (Czech), *Kozlík lékařský* (Czech), *Läkevänderot* (Swedish), *Mushkwalee* (Hindi), *Odolen* (Czech), Phew, Phu, Pretty Betty, *Rohtovirmajuuri* (Finnish), St. George's herb, Setwall, Setwell, Summer heliotrope, *Triaglog* (Welsh), Valara, *Valeriaan* (Dutch), Valerian, *Valeriána lekárska* (Slovak), *Valériane* (French), *Valeriano oficina* (Esperanto), Vandal root, Vermont valerian, and Wild valerian; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of accommodating disposition.

A yellow essential oil is distilled from the roots.

Warning – the root can become addictive and acts as a depressant upon the central nervous system and should be used with caution. (If the root is to be used over a long period authorities recommend that a few days' absence from it should be taken every 2-3 weeks.) If it is taken in too large a dose or for too long a period it can cause headaches, lethargy, muscular spasms and palpitations. It should not be taken during pregnancy.

Common valerian can be confused with heliotrope (*Heliotropium arborescens*) when the plants are in flower.

Officinalis means 'of the shop (usually the apothecary's or herbalist's)'. Certain plants used for medicinal purposes, whether of actual or legendary value, were kept readily available and acquired this name.

It was popular in Roman times for incense and was used in Europe to perfume both clothing and linen from the Middle Ages to the 18th Century. (Some of the closely related species native to warm Asian countries have a pleasanter scent than those from more northern climates and they are still used today in Oriental perfumes.)

Many countries in Europe from the Middle Ages to the 18th Century used the plant as a culinary spice.

Cats and rats are attracted by its odour and some say that it was responsible for the *Pied Piper of Hamelin*'s success in handling the plague of rats. Pieces of the root were once used as bait for trapping them.

Common valerian was once viewed as an aphrodisiac. Thus the belief that any girl wearing common valerian would be spoilt for lovers was hardly surprising. It was also believed to be able to repel witches.

In Derbyshire in Britain this perennial was once in sufficient demand to justify cultivation for the local market. Now however common valerian's popularity in the Country is far less than that on the European mainland, especially that in Germany.

Medicinally, the use of common valerian as a sedative and a remedy for cramp and epilepsy was promoted in Europe (particularly by the Arabs) and has been recognized for centuries in many parts of the world. Records show that peoples as far apart as the Canadian Indians and herbalists in China, in Iran and in the Nordic countries have all used this root not only for these ailments but variously for treating such problems as St. Vitus's Dance, neuralgic pains, cholera and croup. The First and Second World Wars in the 20th Century brought common valerian to the fore however as a tincture which was used in the treatment of shell shock and nervous stress. And in the 20th Century it has also been employed for treating hypochondria and has provided a medicinal placebo. Today in Europe especially it is still employed in remedies for insomnia and various nervous disorders, and extracts of it are sometimes chosen as ingredients in ointments for eczema. Since the 1970s in Germany common valerian has also been prescribed for hyperactive children. The plant is an ingredient used today in some proprietary medicines.