

You are viewing one of thousands of biographies – click below for more, including Search box and access to Plant associated organisations.

[Plant Biographies](#)

[Bibliography](#)

Verbena officinalis

[Synonyms : *Verbena setosa*]

VERVAIN is an annual or perennial. Native to Asia and Europe (including Britain) it has tiny lilac or white flowers.

It is also known as Berbine, *Briw'r March* (Welsh), *Buqexrem* (Maltese), *Cas Gangythraul* (Welsh), Columbine, Common verbena, Common vervain, Countryman's treacle, *Eisenkraut* (German), *Eiserner Heinrich* (German), Enchanter's plant, European verbena, European vervain, *Europese Verbena* (Afrikaans), *Faristariun* (Urdu), Frog's foot, *Gewöhnliches Eisenkraut* (German), Herb grace, Herba sacra, *Hèrbe d'grâce* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Herbe sacrée* (French), Herb of grace, Herb of the cross, Holy herb, Holy plant, Holy vervain, Holy wort, Hyssop, *Ilysiaur hudol* (Welsh), *Järnört* (Swedish), Juno's tears, *Karaita* (Punjabi), *Läkeverbena* (Swedish), Lightning plant, Mercury's blood, Pigeon's grass, Pigeon's meat, Pigeonweed, Purvain, *Rohtorautayrtti* (Finnish), Sacred herb, Setywall, Simpler's joy, *Sporyš lékařský* (Czech), Tears of Isis, Tears of Juno, Turkey grass, Verbena (English, Italian, Spanish), *Vervaine* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), White vervain, Wild hyssop, and *Železník lekársky* (Slovak); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of enchantment, faithfulness, and superstition.

The flowers are pollinated by bees, butterflies and hover-flies.

Warning – the plant should be used with caution. It should not be taken internally during pregnancy.

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.

The name Vervain is said to come from its Celtic name *ferfaen* itself derived from the words *fer* and *faen* (meaning respectively 'to repel' and 'stone') because it was used medicinally to treat kidney-stones. In North America vervain is known as Verbena.

In Egyptian mythology vervain was supposed to have sprung from Isis' tears as she wept for her murdered husband, Osiris.

It is believed that the ancient Greeks and the Romans viewed the plant as sacred. The Romans also considered it to have magical powers (as did the Celts and the Germans) and messengers of war or peace who were sent to other countries would wear it as a wreath to protect them from their enemies. The Romans also used it to decorate altars and believed it could rekindle love.

As already indicated it was held in no less awe in more northerly climates where priests included vervain in sacrificial rituals, and they and their followers believed in its aphrodisiacal powers. The Druids revered it as a sacred edible plant which was used in rituals to cast magic spells and also as a protection against evil. The rituals covered its method of collection which required that it could only be harvested when both the sun and the moon were absent from the sky – and honeycombs had to be placed on the ground in return for the earth's depletion.

European Crusaders returned home from their battles with the belief that the plant appeared out of the ground at Calvary when Christ's hands were nailed to the Cross. From then for

many vervain had to be crossed and blessed with a commemorative verse whenever it was picked (particularly in Lancashire, in Britain) and it was used to sprinkle holy water. Many superstitions and customs surrounded vervain in Britain and other European countries. It was believed to be able to neutralize witches' charms, and that it was one of the ingredients in versions of the renowned 'flying ointment', together with monk's-hood (*Aconitum napellus*) and deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*). It was included in love potions and draughts to make people laugh, and the roots were worn as a necklace to prevent dreaming. Its presence in bath water would not only allow every wish to come true but could enable sight of the future. And all locks would open if a leaf was put into any tiny cut received on the hand. In more recent centuries the roots tied in white satin and worn as a necklace would provide protection from tuberculosis.

Vervain leaves were an ingredient in one of the first commercial hair tonics and restorers.

Today vervain is still used for making home-made liqueurs – possibly in an awareness of its value in easing indigestion. It is also used as a bitter by the drinks industry.

The plant is referred to in a medicinal capacity by the English poet and playwright (and founder of the English opera), Sir William D'Avenant (1606-1668) in his epic *Gondibert* – which he completed when he was imprisoned in the Tower of London.

.....

Black melancholy rusts, that fed despair
Through wounds' long rage, with sprinkled vervain cleared;
Strewed leaves of willow to refresh the air,
And with rich fumes his sullen senses cheered.

.....

At some point (no doubt with the early European settlers) the plant reached North America.

Here the Houma Indian tribe absorbed it into their medicinal repertoire and used the root to treat liver and kidney disorders.

As a medicinal plant vervain was recognized early but by 1830 in large parts of Europe (especially Germany) its popularity had declined. Herbalists had recommended it for treating a wide range of ailments that had included ulcers, fever, pleurisy, headaches, neuralgia, rheumatism, eye disorders, bowel ailments, skin diseases and piles. In India the root has also been used to treat tuberculosis and snake bites. Today it receives attention in Western folk medicine under the embrace of which it can be used for treating insomnia, jaundice, coughs, colds, depression and indigestion. It is also used in homoeopathic remedies. Chinese herbalists use a decoction of the whole plant in the treatment of liver problems, suppressed periods and urinary tract infection. Folk medicine in Mexico and parts of South America employs vervain to treat some forms of cancer.

It is the birthday flower for 18th May.