

Vinca major

[Synonyms : *Vinca major* var. *variegata*, *Vinca pubescens*]

GREATER PERIWINKLE is an evergreen subshrub. Native to Europe it has small purplish-blue flowers.

It is also known as Band plant, *Barvínek větší* (Czech), Bigleaf periwinkle, Blue buttons, Blue periwinkle, *Brčál větší* (Czech), Cockles, Common periwinkle, Creeping myrtle, Cut finger, Devil's eye, *Enredadera* (Canary Island), *Épèrvenches* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), Flower of immortality, *Grande pervenche* (French), Greek periwinkle, *Grosses Immergrün* (German), Hundred eyes, Larger periwinkle, *Perfagl Mwyaf* (Welsh), Periwinkle, Quater, Running myrtle, Sorcerer's violet, *Stor vintergröna* (Swedish), Virgin flower, and *Zimozeleň* (Slovak); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of early friendship, sincere friendship, and tender recollections.

The flowers are pollinated by long-tongued bees.

Warning – all parts are poisonous although it is believed to be safe if used in small amounts.

Major is derived from Latin *maior* (greater) meaning 'greater, bigger or larger'.

The name Sorcerer's violet came about because greater periwinkle was used in love potions and charms to repel evil spirits – and was also used in ritual exorcism.

During Medieval times in Britain convicted criminals wore garlands of periwinkles as they made their way to the gallows. And in Wales it was believed to be unwise to dig up a plant growing on a grave unless you were prepared to be haunted by the occupant. In Europe this shrub was also used on the one hand to exorcise evil spirits and on the other as an ingredient in love philtres and charms. The Germans named it the 'Flower of immortality' while the French viewed it as a token of friendship.

The flowers have been commemorated in literature. An English novelist and dramatist, Mary Russell Mitford (1786-1855) dwelt on it when she wrote

Here is the hedge along which the periwinkle breathes and twines so profusely; with its evergreen leaves shining like the myrtle, and its starry blue flowers when we do meet with it, it is so abundant and so welcome – the very robin-redbreast of flowers, a winter friend.

While the celebrated English poet, William Wordsworth (1770-1850) wrote

Through primrose tufts in that green bower,
The periwinkle trailed its wreaths;
And 'tis my faith that every flower,
Enjoys the air it breathes.

Although both the greater and lesser periwinkles (*Vinca minor*) have been used for a long time medicinally, folk medicine tends to choose only greater periwinkle today. However in the past when either plant was considered to be effective and they could be seen growing in monastery gardens. European herbalists recommended their use for treating boils, cramp, piles, skin ailments, toothache and nosebleeds, as well as a remedy for nightmares and nervous disorders and as an aphrodisiac. It was also suggested for treating period problems, haemorrhages, tonsillitis, diarrhoea, scurvy and various respiratory ailments. Today it can be employed to treat period problems, nosebleeds, mouth ulcers and sore throats particularly – and it can be an ingredient in some proprietary medicines.

It is the birthday flower for 31st January.