

St John's Wort *Hypericum species*

What's in a name?

The common name comes from its traditional flowering and harvesting on St John's day, 24 June. The plant is also known as devil's chaser, devil's scourge, God's herb and human blood. Many of these names are directly associated with Midsummer Day ceremonies (see below) and the sap colour (blood red), when crushed.

Botany & Ecology

One of the species prefers damp boggy conditions while others are more common on dry chalk grasslands. All the species produce many sun-like blooms between June and September and grow up to two feet tall.

The flowers have five petals which are rich in nectar. They are host to many butterflies, moths, bees and other pollinators. The plant reproduces both by self-pollination and via the activities of insects when feeding on the nectar.

St John's Wort thrives in areas with either a winter or summer-dominant rainfall pattern and the seeds will last for decades in the soil seed bank, germinating when the ground is disturbed.

Hypericum is derived from the Greek words hyper (above) and eikon (picture). It refers to the tradition of hanging plants over religious icons in the home during St John's Day, to ward off evil.



Folklore

This plant has long been associated with the 'power of good'. It was seen to be good luck to keep a sprig in the house to ward off evil spirits. Both the pagan Midsummer Day rituals and more latterly the Christian Feast of St John the Baptist celebrations involve lighting a bonfire which would be topped with this plant and other similar herbs. For the pagans this action was intended to mimic the power of the sun.

Moreover, the smoke was seen as a purifier and as a protector against lightening, drought and field fires and was left to waft over villages and the agricultural lands.

Folk Medicine

During the 16th century the plant was used to heal wounds. A mixture of the red liquid referred to earlier, olive oil, and the flowers would be combined and applied to a wound. Some physicians said that this would heal a wound within eight days. This was used by medicinal herbalists right up until the early 20th century.

If suffering from sciatica, Palsie and Falling Sickness (see glossary) physicians were known to recommend adding the seeds of this plant to a simple broth or wine. This concoction was then to be drunk for 40 days. In modern herbalism, this plant is used to make a fluid suitable for applying to scalds and burns as well as pain relief for cramp and nerve pain. The plant has long been used as a remedy for depression or as a tonic for low spirits in both the UK and parts of Europe. The natural properties held within this plant are being investigated by modern drug companies to identify which elements relieve depression and how they react within the brain. Moreover, the anti viral properties are also being explored as there may be a future role for this plant in the treatment of HIV and AIDS.

*Please note, readers should take advice from a qualified doctor or herbalist before using plants as a cure for ailments.