

Herb Robert *Geranium robertianum*

What's in a name?

The origin of the name is linked to the 17th century French saint Robert. The name has also been linked to the house goblin, Robin Goodfellow; however, due to the unpleasant smell of the leaves when crushed, the plant is also known as 'stinking Roger'.

Botany & Ecology

Herb Robert is a member of the Geranium/Cranesbill family and it is a very hairy plant. The plant is common across the whole of the UK, although, the colour of the flower varies. In Yorkshire, Derbyshire and Teesdale, the flower is white. In the rest of the UK, the flower is pink and turns purple during the early autumn.

This is an annual or biennial shade-tolerant herb; it is found on a wide range of soil types, except those that are strongly acidic. Herb Robert can be found in woodlands, hedgerows, in walls, on shady banks, limestone pavements, screes and coastal shingle, and it can also be found easily in artificial habitats.

As the family name suggests, the seed head looks like a cranes bill and explodes when ripe, propelling the seeds over several meters.



Folklore

Herb Robert has supernatural associations and it was connected to the German sprite, Knecht Rupert, who travelled to the British Isles to form a bond with Robin Goodfellow, the evil fairy believed to bring death to a household.

Folk Medicine

Herb Robert was a highly valued plant by the medieval apothecary. If a person was plagued by mosquitos, traditional herbalism suggested that you can rub crushed leaves (which smell strongly) on the skin as a bug repellent. This is still used in parts of Scotland, particularly the Orkneys to avoid mosquitos bites.

Other recorded uses of the plant are as tonic for tummy upsets and the treatment of headaches. It was also used as a treatment to stop both internal and external bleeding, and for a variety of skin conditions like ulcers.

In the 19th century, herbalists were using the plant to heal all new or 'green' wounds and even nowadays, it is still prescribed by modern herbalists for this purpose.



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