

What's in a name?

Lesser Celandine flowers were Wordsworth's favourite. The English romantic poet loved the plant so much that he dedicated a poem to the flowers and he had them carved on his tomb.

Botany

The Lesser Celandine is part of the buttercup family (Ranunculaceae) and the two plants are often confused due to the similar look. However, the Lesser Celandine has nine or ten narrow petals while the Buttercup has only five.

Celandine comes from the Latin 'Chelidonia', meaning swallow. It is believed that the flowers bloomed when the swallows returned and it faded when they left. This rather misleading connection led to it being called 'wort'. In other cases, the plant used to have the name of 'spring messenger' as it is one of the first woodland plants to flower each year, usually towards the end of February, according to Gilbert White.

The name 'Ranunculus' is Latin for 'little frog' or 'tadpole', from *rana*. Perhaps, this refers to many species of the plant flourishing near moist or wet areas, or it could be due to the fact that the unopened flowers resemble tadpoles.

The plant is rich in honey sacks and can be beneficial to bees and other insects. The Celtic name for the plant, 'Grian', which means Sun, is associated with sunrise and sunset. The petals of the flower are green on the underside, and so when closed they become inconspicuous. Usually the flowers should only open after 9am and close by 5pm, they will also close before rainfall. However, it tends to either flower too early or open too late and then close when the light fades.



Folklore

Lesser Celandine flowers throughout the period of March and April and in the past centuries, farmers from Wales used to determine when to sow cereal crops by waiting for the plant to flower. As the spring passes into summer, the flowers wain and the whole plant looks dowdy and shabby. By the end of May, no flowers can be seen, and all the plant above ground withers and dies.

The nutrients are stored in the fibres of the root, which swell and form tubers. The tubers resemble figs, hence the plants Latin name *Ficaria verna*. Farmers on the Western Isles of Scotland believed the tubers resemble a cow's udder and they used to hang them in cow byres to ensure high milk yields. The Irish did the same as it was believed that this would prevent the fairies from stealing the milk. It was said that the swallows used the sap from the stem to strengthen the eyesight of the nestlings. An old charm said that if you carried Celandine with the heart of a mole, you would "vanquish your enemies".

Folk Medicine

Originally, the plant was used in the treatment of piles, both as an internal remedy and in the form of an ointment or suppository. Nowadays, homeopaths use it externally as a remedy for certain skin disorders like warts and other abscesses. It is applied as an ointment which is made by bruising the plant and mixing it with lard.

The saponins are known to be anti-haemorrhoidal, an action enhanced by the astringent tannins and also a fungicidal action. However, physicians stopped using it to treat piles when it was identified that the acrid nature of the juices within the plant were damaging the liver and kidneys. The early leaves are high in vitamin C, which is released when boiled. The juice was also used to prevent scurvy.

