

Primrose *Primula vulgaris*

What's in a name?

The name Primrose derives from two Latin words meaning 'first rose'. The second part of the Latin name, *vulgaris* means 'common'. In another Latin context, *primula* also means 'first (prime)' and meant the first flowers to open in the spring.

Botany & Ecology

The Primrose is the main source of food for larvae (caterpillars) of butterflies and moths, like the Duke of Burgundy butterfly (*Hamearis lucina*) and the Silver-ground Carpet moth (*Xanthorhoe montanata*). Over the winter, the Primrose becomes an important font of nectar for those butterflies that spend the majority of their adult life active throughout the year, this includes the Brimstone (*Gonepteryx rhamni*) and the Peacock (*Aglais io*).

In the past, the plant could be easily found in the hedgerows and on woodland margins, however, as a result of excessive urbanisation and human activity, the presence of the Primrose in its natural habitat has been dramatically reduced.



Folklore

A great prevalence of this plant is still found on the Isle of Man, where the Primrose gets the nickname of 'sumark'. On the island, residents pick the plants on May Day eve and distribute them in front of houses for good luck as it was believed the plant would attract fairies. Contrarily, in Ireland, farmers used to scatter the flowers by the cow sheds/byres to prevent the fairies from stealing the milk.

In Norfolk and other counties in England, however, the flower was believed to bring misfortune. The Primrose was seen as an omen of death, if the plant flowered during the winter season.

Folk Medicine

In early medicinal practices, the plant was used as soothing ingredient in the making of salves for irritable skin and burns. The leaves and flowers were infused together to form an eyewash and mouthwash for sore throats, a practice that was used by herbalists well into the 20th century.

Another use for the crinkly leaves, of both *Primula* and its cousin the Cowslip, was to remove wrinkles by steaming lightly the leaves and laid them on the skin. In the 17th century, doctors used the plant to make cures for gout, migraine and toothache. With time, the use of *Primula* during the 19th century was reduced to the treatment of only fresh wounds. The leaves were made into an ointment, applied and covered with a bandage. This practice continued into the 20th century after the discovery of a recipe for the ointment in a WI handbook for 'lotions and positions', in 1955.

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