

Borage

Botanical: *Borago officinalis* (LINN.)

Family: N.O. Boraginaceae

Synonym

Burrage.

Parts Used

Leaves and flowers.

Habitat

The Common Borage is a hardy annual plant coming originally from Aleppo but now naturalized in most parts of Europe and frequently found in this country, though mostly only on rubbish heaps and near dwellings, and may be regarded as a garden escape. It has long been grown freely in kitchen gardens, both for its uses as a herb and for the sake of its flowers, which yield excellent honey.

Description

The whole plant is rough with white, stiff, prickly hairs. The round stems, about 1 1/2 feet high, are branched, hollow and succulent; the leaves alternate, large, wrinkled, deep green, oval and pointed, 3 inches long or more, and about 1 1/2 inch broad, the lower ones stalked, with stiff, one celled hairs on the upper surfaces and on the veins below, the margins entire, but wavy. The flowers, which terminate the cells, are bright blue and star-shaped, distinguished from those of every plant in this order by their prominent black anthers, which form a cone in the centre and have been described as their beauty spot. The fruit consists of four brownish-black nutlets.

History

In the early part of the nineteenth century, the young tops of Borage were still sometimes boiled as a pot-herb, and the young leaves were formerly considered good in salads.

The fresh herb has a cucumber-like fragrance. When steeped in water, it imparts a coolness to it and a faint cucumber flavour, and compounded with lemon and sugar in wine, and water, it makes a refreshing and restorative summer drink. It was formerly always an ingredient in cool tankards of wine and cider, and is still largely used in claret cup.

Our great grandmothers preserved the flowers and candied them.

Borage was sometimes called Bugloss by the old herbalists, a name that properly belongs to *Anchusa officinalis*, the Alkanet, the Small Bugloss being *Lycopsis arvensis*, and Viper's Bugloss being the popular name for *Echium vulgare*.

Some authorities consider that the Latin name *Borago*, from which our popular name is taken, is a corruption of *corago*, from *cor*, the heart, and *ago*, I bring, because of its cordial effect.

In all the countries bordering the Mediterranean, where it is plentiful, it is spelt with a double 'r,' so the word may be derived from the Italian *borra*, French *bourra*, signifying hair or wool, words which in their turn are derived from the Low Latin *burra*, a flock of wool, in reference to the thick covering of short hairs which clothes the whole plant.

Henslow suggests that the name is derived from *barrach*, a Celtic word meaning 'a man of courage.'

Gerard says:

'Pliny calls it Euphrosinum, because it maketh a man merry and joyfull: which thing also the old verse concerning Borage doth testifie:

Ego Borago - (I, Borage)

Gaudia semper ago. - (Bring alwaies courage.)

Those of our time do use the flowers in sallads to exhilerate and make the mind glad. There be also many things made of these used everywhere for the comfort of the heart, for the driving away of sorrow and increasing the joy of the minde. The leaves and floures of Borage put into wine make men and women glad and merry and drive away all sadnesse, dulnesse and melancholy, as Dios corides and Pliny affirme. Syrup made of the floures of Borage comforteth the heart, purgeth melancholy and quieteth the phrenticke and lunaticke person. The leaves eaten raw ingender good bloud, especially in those that have been lately sicke.'

According to Dioscorides and Pliny, Borage was the famous *Nepenthe* of Homer, which when drunk steeped in wine, brought absolute forgetfulness.

John Evelyn, writing at the close of the seventeenth century tells us: 'Sprigs of Borage are of known virtue to revive the hypochondriac and cheer the hard student.'

Parkinson commends it 'to expel pensiveness and melanchollie.' Bacon says that it 'hath an excellent spirit to repress the fuliginous vapour of dusky melancholie.' Culpepper finds the plant useful in putrid and pestilential fever, the venom of serpents, jaundice, consumption, sore throat, and rheumatism.'

Cultivation

Borage flourishes in ordinary soil. It may be propagated by division of rootstocks in spring and by putting cuttings of shoots in sandy soil in a cold frame in summer and autumn, or from seeds sown in fairly good, light soil, from the middle of March to May, in drills 18 inches apart, the seedlings being thinned out to about 15 inches apart in the rows. If left alone, Borage will seed itself freely and comes up year after year in the same place. Seeds may also be sown in the autumn. Those sown then will flower in May, whereas those sown in the spring will not flower till June.

Part Used Medicinally

The leaves, and to a lesser extent, the flowers. Gather the leaves when the plant is coming into flower. Strip them off singly and reject any that are stained and insect-eaten. Pick only on a fine day, when the sun has dried off the dew.

Constituents

Borage contains potassium and calcium, combined with mineral acids. The fresh juice affords 30 per cent, the dried herb 3 per cent of nitrate of potash. The stems and leaves supply much saline mucilage, which when boiled and cooked likewise deposits nitre and common salt. It is to these saline qualities that the wholesome invigorating properties of Borage are supposed to be due. Owing to the presence of nitrate of potash when burnt, it will emit sparks with a slight explosive sound.

Medicinal Action and Uses

Diuretic, demulcent, emollient. Borage is much used in France for fevers and pulmonary complaints. By virtue of its saline constituents, it promotes the activity of the kidneys and for this reason is employed to carry off feverish catarrhs. Its demulcent qualities are due to the mucilage contained in the whole plant.

For internal use, an infusion is made of 1 OZ of leaves to 1 pint of boiling water, taken in wineglassful doses.

Externally, it is employed as a poultice for inflammatory swellings.

Preparation

Fluid extract. Dose, 1/2 to 1 drachm.

The flowers, candied and made into a conserve, were deemed useful for persons weakened by long sickness, and for those subject to swoonings; the distilled water was considered as effectual, and also valuable to cure inflammation of the eyes.

The juice in syrup was thought not only to be good in fevers, but to be a remedy for jaundice, itch and ringworm. Culpepper tells us that in his days: 'The dried herb is never used, but the green, yet the ashes thereof boiled in mead or honeyed water, is available in inflammation and ulcers in the mouth or throat, as a gargle.'