

Common name Lady's Smock, Cuckoo Flower, Meadowcress, Pigeon's Eye, Lucy Locket, Mayflower, and Bittercress.

Latin Name *Cardamine pratensis*

Family Name Brassicaceae, also called Cruciferae because the 4 petals of this family looks like a cross.

Lady's Smock flowers in late spring, early summer, and grows in wet places and at the sides of brooks. Although the plant prefers damp, shady locations it can also be found on roadside verges, meadows and in hedgerows.



Lady's Smock is an herbaceous perennial which means that it dies down in the winter and re-grows in the Spring, The flowers grow clustered on stalks on the top a thin, tapering stem. Each flower has four petals The flowers can vary from white to pink in colour, but are most often a pale lilac with a distinctive yellow centre made up of the plants anthers. The flowers also droop and close up at night or during heavy rain.

The leaves at the top of the stem are non-descript, but can be made out to be compound in nature, with three pairs of opposite leaflets and a single leaflet on the end. At the bottom of the plant the leaves are rounder and look more like those of a pea, although completely unrelated to this family.

The name Lady's Smock derives from Tudor times because of the resemblance to ladies' smocks. It is also known as the Cuckoo Flower, because it appears at the first sound of the cuckoo as shown by the quote from William Shakespeare below.



Cuckoo spit and Meadow frog hopper from www.dsggardening.btinter.net.co.uk

*When daisies pied and violets blue
And lady-smock all silver white
And Cuckoo-buds of yellow hue
Do paint the meadows with delight.*

Shakespeare - Love's Labour's Lost

The meadow frog hopper is attracted to the sap of these plants, and its larvae form frothy blobs on the stems; some people call this cuckoo spit.

What it was used for in the past

It was believed hundreds of years ago to be beneficial to the heart. Leaves were used in salads when lettuce was scarce, as the plant is very closely related to watercress, which is another brassica. However, despite the two tasting very similar, watercress seems to have taken salads by storm, whereas lady's smock has been forgotten.

Lady's Smock contains lots of vitamin C (about 15 times more than in a lemon) and so was used in the eighteenth-century as a remedy against scurvy which is a disease which effected people, like sailors in the past. These were unable to get enough vitamin C from their diet and in fact scurvy was so prevalent in the British Navy that it was considered as one of the occupational diseases of seamen in those times.



Treating Scurvy aboard ship from www.royal-navy.mod.uk

It affected the crew more than the officers, as the latter were able to get different things to eat. For example On Vasco da Gama's voyage to discover a passage by the Cape of Good Hope to the East Indies in 1497, 100 out of 160 men were died from the disease. While in Anson's voyages round the world in 1741, the ship the Centurion buried 292 men out of 506 sailors; whilst in the Gloucester two thirds of the crew died.

The symptoms of scurvy were weakness, aching joints and muscles, bleeding of the gums internal bleeding into the muscles and joints, and the drying-up of the skin and hair.

On a nicer note, in Elizabethan times, Lady's Smock was used to make starch for ruffles. It was also unlucky to have the plant indoors as it was a fairy plant, or to weave into the garlands used on May Day. Fresh tubers were used in love spells whilst in Ireland, it was believed that a human or animal born on May Day would have an Evil Eye. Luckily this could be prevented by bathing the eye with the juice of Lady's Smock!

What other animals use it

Lady's Smock is a very important food source for the caterpillars of the **orange-tip butterfly** and the **green veined white butterfly**. You will often notice the butterfly flitting past before you notice the flower!



Orange Tip Butterfly *Anthocharis cardamines*



Pieris napi Green Veined Butterfly
Photograph by Alan Barnes



Sources

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