

Common Name: **Centaury**

Genus: *Erythraea*

Species: *centaurium*

Family: Gentianaceae

AKA: Common Centaury, Feverwort, Centaury Gentian, Red Centaury, Filwort, Christ's Ladder



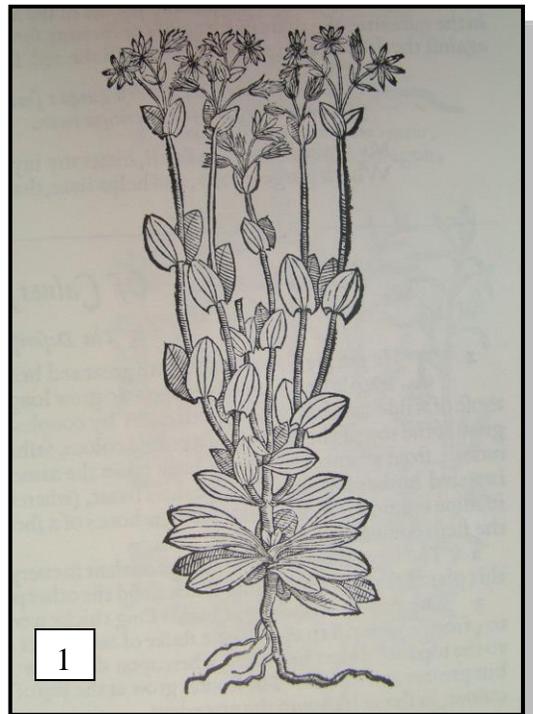
Historical Uses:

**My flower is sweet in smell, bitter my juice in taste
Which purge choler, and helps liver, that else would waste.**

Joannes Postius (Quote from Gerards Herbal)

Medical: “A vulnerary and a febrifuge, it cleanses and heals old ulcers, purges the entire gastrointestinal tract, is a medication for the eyes, eases painful urination, and, as a pessary, brings on the menses or procures abortion.” (1)

“It being beaten when it is green, & applied is conglutinative of wounds, purgative of old ulcers, & brings them to a cicatrix. But being sodden and swallowed down, it expels chollerick & grosse humors through ye belly. But the decoction thereof is a fit glister for the Ischiaticall, drawing out blood, & easing ye pain. Ye Juice also is good for eye medicines cleansing away with Honey such things as darken the Pupilla, & in a Pessum it is extractive of ye menstrua & ye Embrya. But being drank it is equally good for griefs about ye sinews.” (2)



“Being boyled in water and drunke it openeth the stoppings of the liver, gall and spleene it helpeth the yellow jaundice and likewise long and lingering agues: it killeth the wormes in the bellie to be briefe, it cleanseth, scoureth and maketh thinne humors that are thicke, and doth effectually performe whatsoever bitter things can.” “The Centorie being stamped and laid on whilst it is fresh and greene, doth heale and close up green wounds, cleanseth old ulcers and perfectly cureth them. The juice is good in medicines for the eyes; mixed with honey it cleanseth away such things as hinder the sight; and being

drunke it hath a peculiar virtue against the infirmities of the sinues, as *Dioscordies* teacheth. *Joannes Postius* hath thus written: My floure is sweet in smell, bitter my juice in taste, which purge choler, and helps liver, that else would waste.” (3)

“The Saxon herbalists prescribed it largely for snake-bites and other poisons, and it was long celebrated for the cure of intermittent fevers, hence its name of Feverwort” (4)



Image of the spikey flower head as described by Gerard

Household: “Yields a yellow green dye.” (5)

Folklore/Astrology: “It is warm and dry in the second degree, is an herb of **Mars** and was named for its discoverer, **Gentius, King of Illyria** (now called Yugoslavia). The name of Gentius is no longer attached to the plant but now forms the term for an entire genus. Its juice, mixed with the blood of a black plover and placed in lamp oil, will cause all about the lamp to experience such visions that each will think himself to be perceiving and performing great feats of magic. It is also said to counter witchcraft” (6)

“The genus was formerly called *Chironia*, from the Centaur Chiron, who was famous in Greek mythology for his skill in medicinal herbs and is supposed to have cured himself with it from a wound received from an arrow poisoned with the blood of the *Hydra*. The English name Centaury has the same origin.” (7)

Other: “The floures grow at the top in a spikey bush or rundle, of a red colour tending to purple; which in the day time and after the sun is up do open themselves but towards



evening shut up againe. After them come forth small seed vessels of the shape of wheat cormes in which are contained very little seeds,” (8)

Contemporary

Uses:

Parts Used: Whole plant

Medicinal: “A very bitter, dry herb that acts as a tonic for the

digestive system and lowers fever. Internally for dyspepsia, liver and gall bladder complaints, hepatitis, jaundice, anorexia, post-viral syndrome, poor appetite in convalescence, and feverish illnesses. Combined with *Althaea officinalis*, *Chamaemelum nobile*, and *Filipendula ulmaria* for dyspepsia and with *Berberis vulgaris* and *Rumex crispus* for jaundice.” (9)

“Centaury has a relatively mild bitter action, stimulating appetite as well as digestive secretions from the salivary glands, stomach, intestines, and gallbladder. With increased digestive juices, food is processed and broken down more effectively, leading to better absorption of nutrients. For best results, centaury should be taken over several weeks. The preparation should be slowly sipped so that the components can stimulate reflex activity throughout the upper digestive tract.” (10)

Cautions: “Not given to pregnant women.” (11)

“Take only on professional advice if suffering from a stomach or intestinal ulcer.” (12)

Area of Origin: Native to dry grassland and dunes in Europe and SW Asia; naturalized in N America.

Physical description: Variable, small biennial or short lived perennial with a basal rosette and elliptic, veined leaves to 5cm (2in) long. Five-petaled pink flowers are borne in dense clusters on long branched stalks in summer (13)

Plant type: Biennials, occasionally perennials

Form: Herbaceous

Height: To 10 inches

Flower color: Pink

Flowering period: June-September

Soil type/requirements: Sandy, neutral to alkaline soil

Hardiness zone: USDA 4-8

Propagation: By seed sown when ripe

Sources

1. Anderson, p. 71
2. Dioscorides, p. 241
3. Gerard, p. 548
4. Grieve, p. 183
5. Anderson, p. 71
6. Ibid.
7. Grieve, p. 183
8. Gerard, p. 547
9. Bown, p. 162
10. Chevallier, p. 206
11. Bown, p. 162
12. Chevallier, p. 206
13. Bown, p. 162

Illustrations/Images:

1. Gerards Herbal 1597
2. <http://www.naturalmedicinalherbs.net/herbs/c/centaurium-erythraea=centaury.php>
3. <http://www.gardenershq.com/Centaurium-canchalagua.php>