



Greater Celandine *Chelidonium majus*

Greater Celandine is a herb that most will recognise, it is member of the Papaveraceae (Poppy) family, and is not related to Lesser Celandine which is *Ranunculus ficaria* (pilewort) and belongs to the Ranunculaceae family.

(Image; Greater Celandine, Karina Hilterman)

Description: To look at this plant you would think it delicate and gentle – it is anything but this, apart from it being a brittle plant, which is easily crushed—but if you do crush it, an orange sap exudes, which stains, and usually causes irritation to the skin. Take great care not get in your eyes, as it is very irritating.

Greater Celandine is a perennial, which grows to between 30 and 80cms high. It has an upright growth habit and its glaucous grey, green leaves are deeply lobed, and have a slightly wavy edge. All parts of the part exude the orange sap if damaged.

From late spring to the end of summer it flowers, bright yellow with four petals and two sepals, in clusters of 2 to 6.

The seedpods are long, thin, and round, containing many small black seeds. It can become quite invasive as it seeds itself very freely if the soil and moisture suits it well. If you want to prevent it becoming a nuisance, then trim off the seed heads before they mature. Though it prefers light shade and loamy soil, it will tolerate sun, frost, and drought.

Character: Very bitter, astringent, and drying.

Parts used: The aerial parts and roots.

Harvest the aerial parts during the flowering season and the roots in the autumn.

The above ground, or aerial parts, are gathered during the flowering season and dried at high temperatures. The root is harvested in autumn, between August and October and dried. The fresh rhizome is also used. Celandine has a hot and bitter taste; the latex has a narcotic fragrance.

Constituents: Alkaloids (including isoquinolines; coptisine, berberine, chelidone, chelerythrine, chelamine, sanguinarine, protopine and sparteine). Chelidonic, succinic, malic and caffeic acids. Bitter principle; chelidoxanthin, volatile oil, proteolytic enzymes, and orange latex.

Therapeutic Actions: Spasmolytic, cholagogue, antimicrobial, diuretic, mild analgesic, purgative, sedative to the nervous system; (too much can immobilise the muscles, so definitely a herb to use with caution), oncostatic, antimitotic (inhibits mitosis - cell division) cytostatic (inhibiting cell growth and division) and immunostimulating.

This herb is considered an important treatment for the gall bladder, as an antispasmodic it relieves biliary colic and is considered to be a treatment for improving the health and function of the gall bladder and for treating gallstones.

As a lung herb, its mild sedative action assists to relieve coughing spasms and has been used through history to treat whooping cough, bronchitis, and asthma. Is it has antimicrobial activity, it would certainly assist with the lung infections. **NB:** there are 'safer herbs' to use for internal use! A commercial cancer treatment based on *Chelidonium* has been developed in Ukraine.

There are reports of the use of this herb causing liver damage, therefore perhaps best to only use externally, and then, with care.

Dosage: Caution: Use this herb with caution, take care not to get the sap on skin (unless used to 'clear skin lesions'), and only use internally with supervision of a Medical Herbalist!

Infusion: If used, take care; no more than 1 dessertspoonful of fresh herb or 2 tsp dried herb daily.

Tincture 10-25 mls per week (short-term, supervised treatment only).



Topical Uses: apply the fresh sap (carefully) to unwanted skin lesions, i.e. warts, skin tags, and actinic keratoses

Following a published warning in the Lancet in 2002 regarding the ingested use of Celandine, leading potentially to liver toxicity, the TGA (Therapeutic Goods Administration; Australia), requested both a 'preliminary safety review' (May 2003) and then a 'more complete safety review' (August 2003) for the Complementary Medicines Evaluation Committee (CMEC)

On the basis of its deliberations, the CMEC has recommended that the TGA maintain "*Chelidonium majus* as a listable substance, but that oral products be required to include a label warning statement. The statement is to advise consumers to use products containing the herb under the supervision of a healthcare professional, to seek advice from a healthcare professional before commencing use if there is history of liver disease, and to discontinue use of the herb if particular symptoms occur."

"Health professionals are asked to report any suspected adverse reactions thought to be associated with *Chelidonium majus* (greater celandine) to the Adverse Drug Reactions Unit at the TGA using the online reporting form."

Gerard said: "the juice of the herbe is good to sharpen the sight, for it cleanseth and consumeth away slimie things that cleave about the ball of the eye and hinder the sight and especially being boiled with honey in a brasen vessell, as Dioscorides teacheth."

Culinary Uses: As it is so very bitter, with an escharotic action, it is not used in food preparation.

(Image: Franz Eugen Köhler, Köhler's Medizinal-Pflanzen)

History & Mystery:

Common names for this herb include; devils milk, garden celandine, greater celandine, kenning wort, swallow herb, swallowwort, tetterwort, celydoyne and wart wort.

Gender: Masculine, Planet: Sun, Ruling Sign: Aquarius and Uranus, Element: Fire.

The Powers ascribed to Celandine are happiness, escape, protection, and legal matters. This herb sounds like a soap opera! From Scott Cunningham's book about 'Magical Herbs,' he wrote that this herb aids in escaping imprisonment and entrapment of any kind. It is a suggestion to wear it next to your skin and replace every three days to aid this! (I wonder about the possibility of this causing burns, or erosion on the skin areas, which it is in contact with.) He also suggests that it imparts joy and good spirits if worn and it can sure depression.

If you are in trouble with the law, then wearing it when going to court to assist win favour with the judge and jury, and to protect one's self!

Traditionally, it was and, still is, used in Suffolk as a fomentation for toothache. It was used as a 'foot refresher' by Gypsy folk. Knowing its therapeutic actions, it could be useful to erode plantar warts, corns, and bunions? In addition, chewing was used to relieve toothache; a very bitter treatment.

Pliny the Elder and Dioscorides (1st century AD) prescribed it as a 'useful detoxifying agent'

A lovely garden plant, a herb used through history; though, to be used with caution...

References: Carole Fisher & Gilian Painter, 1996, *Materia Medica of Western Herbs For The Southern Hemisphere*; Magical Herbs, Scott Cunningham; A Modern Herbal, Mrs Grieve.

Prepared for the Herb Federation of New Zealand's Herb Awareness Month 2025. Enquiries: www.herbs.org.nz

Advisory Note: This text is given as a general guidance. If any adverse reactions occur or symptoms persist, please contact a qualified medical herbalist or medical doctor immediately.

