

MADRYN'S MILLEFLEURS

1) Borago officinalis

Oh, no, not borage again - I thought I pulled all that out! Yep - it's back, notorious towering monster sneaking through my kale beds taking over the minute my back is turned. But it's lovely. Culpepper describes it as "Hot & moist in the first degree, cheers the heart and helps drooping spirits".

Borage is a towering annual, with huge, slightly prickly leaves and masses of gorgeous, tiny, starry, blue flowers, reminiscent of a bright summer sky. The entire plant smells strongly of cucumber. Native to the British Isles and southern Europe, it was known by many folk names, including borraich (Celtic for courage) and the Herb of Gladness. All my reference books describe this beauty as reaching 60 cm, which it may well do on average soil, but after 29 years of organic gardening, the soil at Wildwood is not average, and my plants are monsters towering well over a metre high, and arching their great prickly branches out to smother all their companions.

Borage flowers were historically renowned for their beauty, often incorporated into medieval tapestries and embroideries, and many old masters chose "borage blue" as their preferred colour to depict the Madonna's robe in religious works. For courage, the flowers were added to the stirrup cups of the crusaders, to bolster their spirits as they departed for the Holy Land. "Borage for Courage" was a popular toast. The myth of this lovely plant bolstering courage has its roots in fact - with modern scientific technology, analysis has revealed that borage plants contain high concentrations of calcium, potassium and other mineral salts thought to act as a stimulant on the adrenal glands, where courage begins. Indeed, if burned, the nitrate of potash content is so high that the material will emit sparks and explosive pops like tiny fireworks.

It is now recommended by herbalists as a tonic for reviving and renewing the adrenal cortex, particularly useful after treatment with steroids, or after periods of severe long term stress. It also acts as an anti-inflammatory, and poultices of borage are used to reduce swelling and pain of inflammatory injuries. The seeds stimulate milk production in nursing mothers, and gamma linoleic acid from the seeds, to be used as an alternative to evening primrose oil, and with a similar action. The oil is known commercially as Star Flower Oil. Fresh borage can be safely used over a long period without toxic build up in the system, although the regular use of Star Flower Oil requires medical supervision.

Borage also has a number of culinary uses, and my personal preference is to sprinkle the starry blue flowers through a pretty salad (looks stunning in combination with Heartsease and red nasturtiums), or to float them on cool summer drinks. The bright, cucumber flavour is very refreshing, and the colour is a delight. The shocked faces of the diners is also of value - most are horrified by

the concept of eating pretty flowers! Crystallising the flowers makes magical cake decorations, and the young leaves can be used in salads and sandwiches, for cucumber crunch, or steamed as a spinach substitute.

As a bee attractant, borage is in a class of it's own. Bees prefer blue, and the masses of blue flowers produced by a few borage plants ensures your garden will receive the very earliest bee activity in the springtime. I recommend planting borage next to tomato or strawberry plants, as it is known to increase the flavour of both, something I can personally attest to, and the extra bees in your garden patch will ensure high pollination rates, and extra high fruit yields. Owing to high mineral content, composted borage is a wonderful soil enricher, and your chooks will love you for any leaves you offer them.

Borage seeds prolifically, and once you have acquired this voluptuous creature, you will never be without it, although it may not always rise up where you would like it to, and it's alarming growth rate means that plants can seem to appear almost overnight.

Seeds are easily obtained through many local hardware stores, often in the culinary herb section, or as a started plant through Island Herbs phone 6267-9218. I will also have seeds to give away at certain times of year - please don't be afraid to ask. But be warned - just as we find it palatable, so do a myriad other creatures. Those with hens, possums or wallabies sharing their gardens will need to protect young plants.

YIS

Madryn of Wildwood

References: The Complete Book of Herbs, Lesley Bremner 1988, Culpeper's Herbal 1653, Medicinal Plants, Ben-Erik van Wyk 2004, Holistic Herbal David Hoffman 1990, Wild Flowers of Britain & Ireland, Fitter, Fitter & Blamey 2003