

## MADRYN'S MILLEFLEURS

### 2) Rampion

*Campanula rampunculus*

One spring day, around 4 years ago, I was wandering through my favourite plant nursery, when I spied a cluster of the most glorious flowers. I recognised them immediately as a member of the distinctive campanula genus, but a kind I had not seen before. I wasted no time in rounding up the nursery owner, and quizzing her about these exquisite flowers. It turned out to be rampion, and ancient plant popular in medieval times as a delicious vegetable, and seldom grown for the delight of the flower alone. A few hours later I was planting some at Wildwood.

Rampion is a stately and delicate beauty, with long, graceful arching stems sprinkled their full length with tiny, intensely mauve bell flowers, hanging from one side of the stem like a row of jewels. The stems reach almost a metre long, but have a charming way of inclining themselves under their own weight, forming swaying, nodding, spiralling stems which swoop towards the ground, waving gently in the slightest breeze. The effect is truly magical, especially if planted in a group, and one can almost see fairies peeping out from among the finely lanceolate, rosette foliage, or trying on the bells for hats.

Rampion, like so many medieval plants, is the stuff of legend. In the old Grimm's fairy tale of Rapunzle, it was the theft of rampion, also known as rapunzle, from the witch's garden which resulted in imprisonment for the heroine. The tale begins before Rapunzle's birth, and tells of a young mother-to-be who craved the taste of rampions during her pregnancy. Her husband thus contrived to steal some of the vegetables from a witch's garden. The witch, enraged by this offence, demanded the child when it was born as recompense for the theft. At the birth, the mother named her baby daughter Rapunzle, after the vegetable which had come at so high a price, and cost her her child. It is not atypical for a pregnant woman to crave fresh vegetables, and delicious rampion with its high nutrient content, would have been a prize indeed for a medieval family of the lower classes.

Long before Rapunzle was imprisoned in her tower for the sins of her parents, there is evidence of stone age European societies eating wild rampion as a regular part of their diet, and the plant was distributed widely throughout Britain and the cooler parts of Europe, where it provided a tasty addition to the diet during late summer, and autumn when the roots are dug. Monastic records show that it was highly sought after in medieval times, and often cultivated in monastic gardens and the gardens of the nobility. It remained a popular vegetable right through to the end of the Elizabethan age. While the delicate leaves were a frequent ingredient in salads, it is the white roots for which this vegetable is best known. In the medieval kitchen, the roots were boiled, steamed

or baked, and served either as a hot vegetable or cooled and presented in a salad dressed in oil and vinegar. Keen to try this gastronomic experiment, I reluctantly ripped my beautiful plants out of the ground, put the last of the flowers into a vase, and set about preparing the roots. I must say that one needs to be fairly enthusiastic to attempt this task, as we are speaking of roots which though stout, are quite knobbly, and slightly hairy. Earth gets into every nook and cranny, and one must allow plenty of time for the cleaning process. To grow enough for a regular addition to the kitchen, one would need to plant out a sizable bed, as each plant offers only enough for a single serve. However, the flavour is very pleasing, quite sweet and nutty, and the plants themselves are among the loveliest I have seen. Like many medieval foods, rampions are experiencing something of a revival in Europe, once again attracting the interest of innovative chefs as an exotic addition to the menu.

Like all vegetables grown primarily for their roots, rampions do best in deep, well cultivated, well mulched soil. Campanulas in general prefer moist, cool and shady conditions, and rampion is one of few vegetables which will tolerate some shade, although it needs more sun than most of its relatives. When focusing on root yields, it is wise not to add extra nitrogen, as the plant is likely to give all its energy to a lush, leafy top at the expense of root development. Ideally, it should be grown in a bed which has previously been planted in a leafy vegetable, which will have absorbed much of the high nitrogen content common to organic gardens. Rampion, sadly, is an annual, and must be replanted each year to maintain a supply for the kitchen. However, seeds can be saved, if the flowers are allowed to mature and the seed pods to ripen.

Rampion can be obtained from Island Herbs as a started plant, and needs protection from marauding chooks, peacocks and possums.

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Madryn of Wildwood

References: Grimms Fairytales, In a Unicorn's Garden, Judith McLeod 2008, Lindy at Island Herbs