

Rooting for you

A versatile herb valued as a tonic for the nervous system, valerian's soporific effects were once considered a great asset to public decorum, discovers Deborah Nicholls-Lee

IT'S said that it wasn't his merry tune alone that helped the Pied Piper of legend to lead the rats out of Hamelin. Hidden in his pockets were the roots of the valerian plant, its musky odour irresistible to the bothersome rodents that dutifully followed its scent through the town.

Uproot the common valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*) and you can experience for yourself that curious 'socky' smell: tantalising to rats, perhaps, but to humans, reminiscent of unwashed feet or over-ripe cheese. Above ground, however, this herbaceous, serrated-leaved perennial is charming, its pretty clusters of pink trumpet-shaped flowers, which

appear in June, dispersing a sweet vanilla-like aroma, rather like the honeysuckle to which it is related. The plant's scent is particularly appreciated by felines, who may roll in its vivid green foliage and chew on the root, much as they would with catmint.

Whereas the moisture-loving common valerian is happiest in a ditch or damp meadow, the naturalised red valerian (*Valeriana rubra*) has reached us from warmer climes and seeks out somewhere drier, insinuating itself through a rocky crag or huddling in crowds on a chalky cliff top. As the curtain closes on summer, both form snowflake-like parachutes that float their seeds to pastures new.

Valerian might have attracted the Piper's rats, but, in our gardens, it does a good job at repelling unwelcome visitors, such as red flour beetles, booklice and even mosquitoes.

'Like many strongly scented plants, it can help deter certain small pests, which is Nature's way of creating balance,' notes wildlife garden designer and author Joel Ashton, founder of Wild Your Garden.

As important, however, are the creatures it invites in. 'It's one of those plants that quietly supports the balance of a garden: the clusters of small flowers draw in bees, hoverflies and butterflies in huge numbers and it provides a valuable nectar source throughout the summer,' he explains. 'It's a classic example of how a single species can add beauty and help the wider ecosystem at the same time.'

Our ancestors knew that valerian was special and wove various legends around it. The ancient Greeks believed it could ward off evil and hung bunches of it in their windows and, according to Teutonic mythology, the earth goddess, Hertha, who

rode a stag, used a riding crop made of valerian to spur on her antlered steed. Elsewhere, the plant (also known as amantilla) was thought to pacify, rather than rouse. Maud Grieve's *A Modern Herbal* (1931) references a medieval recipe that suggests valerian could be a great asset to public decorum: 'Men who begin to fight and when you wish to stop them,' it reads, 'give to them the juice of Amantilla id est Valeriana and peace will be made immediately.'

It's this same calming property that sees valerian briefly mentioned in Gustave Flaubert's landmark novel *Madame Bovary* (1857). When the bored, restless Emma 'grew pale

‘Valerian root was “a special preservative against the plague”’

and suffered from palpitations of the heart', it is 'valerian and camphor baths' that her husband, Charles, a country doctor, prescribes.



Scent-sational lure

Valerian isn't only valued for its sedative properties. Essential oil from the roots and leaves is used in some low-sugar ice creams to mask bitterness and some producers have even tried lacing their wares with valerian to harness its relaxing properties. The dried root (stuffed into a hessian pouch and tied to a post or tree) is also listed as one of the lure ingredients still used to trap Scottish wildcats for monitoring; it was once rubbed on earthworms to attract trout to the bait and placed in traps to entice rats. The Pied Piper was right after all.



On screen, however, valerian is positively soporific. In the 1974 adaptation of *Murder on the Orient Express*, it is the addition of valerian, as a sleep aid, to Edward Ratchett's drink that helps mask the stronger sedative used to render him unconscious. More recently, the BBC television series *Merlin* (2008–12) showed the sorceress Morgana using valerian to subdue Arthur in order to poison him with henbane.

All this drama and intrigue risks vilifying a plant whose name, derived from the Latin 'to be healthy', quite rightly hints at its virtue. According to Cotswolds-based medical herbalist, Anne McIntyre, there's much to appreciate in valerian's gentle work. 'Valerian is highly valued as



a sedative and tonic for the nervous system and is often found in over-the-counter remedies to promote good sleep and ease anxiety, nervous tension, agitation, nervous headaches and exhaustion,' she reveals. 'The calming effects of valerian affect muscles and help relieve tension and pain,' she continues, and 'several compounds in the root increase levels of GABA (gamma-aminobutyric acid), which is known as the anti-anxiety neurotransmitter'. Animals can also benefit—some riders administer it to calm jumpy equines and it is perhaps testimony to its efficacy that valerian is banned for official events.

In the aftermath of the First World War, the herb formed part of the treatment of the numerous 'cases of mental breakdown', as documented in the book *Medical Services Diseases of the War* (1923). 'In the cases marked by tremors special measures were needed,' notes

the book, and 'a mixture containing valerian was administered night and morning'

Classical civilisation held valerian in high regard, with the esteemed physicians Hippocrates, Dioscorides and Galen all prescribing it for insomnia. In medieval times, valerian—also known as 'setwall' or 'all-heal'—was enlisted to tackle disease. According to the document *Good Councell against the Plague* (1592), valerian root was 'a special preservative against the plague, being chewed in the mouth'. It was also used to treat the plague's disfiguring sores. Gather 'two handfuls of Valerian, three rootes of Danwoorte, and a handfull of Smallidge', it recommends, and 'seeth [simmer] them in sheepes suet and water, with a few crums of bread: and applye it hotte to the sore'.

In the same year, the Italian nobleman and botanist Fabio Colonna reported in his

In the pink: the clusters of small blushing flowers of common valerian—*Valeriana officinalis*—spread a sweet scent similar to vanilla on their emergence in June

illustrated book *Phytobasanos* that a course of powdered valerian root had healed his own epilepsy. 'They that will have their heale,/Must put Setwall in their keale [kale]' goes an old saying quoted by the English herbalist John Gerard to convey the widespread use of valerian as a cure-all. In his seminal book *The Herbal*, published in 1597, he compiles its many medical uses: the dried root helps cure cramps, convulsions, ulcers and bruises, he writes, and 'provoketh urine' when a patient is retentive. Not only urine, either: 'Some hold opinion', he adds, that mixed with wine, it 'do purge upward and downward.' 🐌