

Hyoscyamus niger

Hyoscyamus niger, commonly known as **henbane**, **black henbane** or **stinking nightshade**, is a **poisonous** plant in the family *Solanaceae* that originated in **Eurasia**, though it is now globally distributed.^[1]

Bavarian Purity Law of 1516 outlawed ingredients other than barley, hops, yeast, and water.^[11]

Henbane is sometimes identified with the "**hebenon**" poured into the ear of **Hamlet's** father,^{[2][12]} although other candidates for hebenon exist.^[13]

1 Toxicity and historical usage

It was historically used in combination with other plants, such as mandrake, deadly nightshade, and datura as an anaesthetic potion, as well as for its psychoactive properties in "magic brews".^{[1][2][3]} These psychoactive properties include visual hallucinations and a sensation of flight.^[4] It was originally used in continental Europe, Asia, and the Arab world,^[5] though it did spread to England in the Middle Ages. The use of henbane by the ancient Greeks was documented by Pliny who said it was "of the nature of wine and therefore offensive to the understanding," and by Dioscorides who recommended it as a sedative and analgesic.^[6] The plant, recorded as *Herba Apollinaris*, was used to yield oracles by the priestesses of Apollo.^[1] Recently evidence for its earlier use in the Scottish Neolithic has been debated.^[7] John Gerard's *Herball* states: "The leaves, the seeds and the juice, when taken internally cause an unquiet sleep, like unto the sleep of drunkenness, which continueth long and is deadly to the patient. To wash the feet in a decoction of Henbane, as also the often smelling of the flowers causeth sleep."^[8]

The name henbane dates at least to AD 1265. The origins of the word are unclear, but "hen" probably originally meant death rather than referring to chickens.^[9] Hyoscyamine, scopolamine, and other tropane alkaloids have been found in the foliage and seeds of the plant.^[11] Common effects of henbane ingestion in humans include hallucinations,^[11] dilated pupils, restlessness, and flushed skin. Less common symptoms, such as tachycardia, convulsions, vomiting, hypertension, hyperpyrexia, and ataxia, have all been noted.

Henbane can be toxic, even fatal, to animals in low doses. Not all animals are susceptible; for example, the larvae of some *Lepidoptera* species, including cabbage moths, eat henbane.

It was sometimes one of the ingredients in **gruit**, traditionally used in **beers** as a flavouring. Several cities, most notable **Pilsen**, were named after its German name form "Bilsenkraut" in context of the production for beer flavouring.^[10] It fell out of usage for beer when it was replaced by hops in the 11th to 16th centuries, as the

2 Misidentification



Apothecary vessels for *Hyoscyamus* preparations, Germany, 19th century

In 2008, celebrity chef Antony Worrall Thompson recommended henbane as a "tasty addition to salads" in the August 2008 issue of *Healthy and Organic Living* magazine. He subsequently said he had made an error, confusing the herb with fat hen, a member of the spinach family. He apologized, and the magazine sent subscribers an urgent message stating, "[henbane] is a very toxic plant and should never be eaten".^[14]

3 Gallery

- *Hyoscyamus niger* - MHNT
- Henbane seeds
- Henbane in flower
- Henbane fruits
- Large flowering henbane

4 References

- [1] Roberts 1998, p. 31
- [2] Anthony John Carter MB FFARCS (March 2003). "Myths and mandrakes" (PDF). *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* **96** (3): 144–147. doi:10.1258/jrsm.96.3.144. PMC 539425. PMID 12612119.
- [3] A. J. Carter (1996-12-21). "Narcosis and nightshade". *British Medical Journal* **313** (7072): 1630–1632. doi:10.1136/bmj.313.7072.1630. PMC 2359130. PMID 8991015.
- [4] Schultes & Smith 1976, p. 22
- [5] Joseph Perez, Janet Lloyd, *The Spanish Inquisition*, Yale University Press, 2006, ISBN 0-300-11982-8, ISBN 978-0-300-11982-4, p229 footnote 10]
- [6] Grieve, Maud (1971). *A Modern Herbal: The Medicinal, Culinary, Cosmetic and Economic Properties, Cultivation and Folk-lore of Herbs, Grasses, Fungi, Shrubs, & Trees with All Their Modern Scientific Uses, Volume 1*.
- [7] Black Henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger* L.) in the Scottish Neolithic, *Journal of Archaeological Science* (1999) 26, 45–52
- [8] Grieve, Maud (1971). *A Modern Herbal: The Medicinal, Culinary, Cosmetic and Economic Properties, Cultivation and Folk-lore of Herbs, Grasses, Fungi, Shrubs, & Trees with All Their Modern Scientific Uses, Volume 1*.
- [9] Anatoly Liberman, J. Lawrence Mitchell (2008). *An Analytic Dictionary of English Etymology: An Introduction*. U of Minnesota Press. pp. 108–110. ISBN 978-0-8166-5272-3.
- [10] Christian Rätsch (2015-07-29). "Urbock oder echtes Bier" (in German). Retrieved 2015-08-26. *Diese ehemaligen Anpflanzungen leben in verschiedenen Ortbezeichnungen bis heute fort, z.B. Bilsensee, Billendorf, Bilsengarten und vor allem im böhmischen Pilsen. So hat die Stadt, nach der unser modernes, stark gehopftes Bier »Pilsner« heißt, seinen Namen selbst vom Bilsenkraut, das dem echten »Pilsener Bier«, nämlich dem Bilsenkraut-Bier seinen Namen verlieh! In der Schweiz lebt der alte Name pilsener krut in der Bezeichnung Pilsenkraut bis heute fort.*
- [11] Dan Rabin, Carl Forget (1998). *The Dictionary of Beer and Brewing*. Taylor & Francis. xii. ISBN 978-1-57958-078-0.

- [12] "Hebenon". *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary* (1913 + 1828).
- [13] Anatoly Liberman, J. Lawrence Mitchell (2008). *An Analytic Dictionary of English Etymology: An Introduction*. U of Minnesota Press. pp. 110–111. ISBN 978-0-8166-5272-3.
- [14] Dawar, Anil (August 4, 2008). "TV chef Worrall Thompson recommends deadly weed as salad ingredient". *The Guardian* (London). Retrieved 2008-08-04.

5 References

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6 External links

- Henbane on Erowid

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