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FLORA IN SWITZERLAND

Edelweiss - *Leontopodium alpinum*

Edelweiss (*Leontopodium alpinum*), one of the best-known European mountain flowers, belongs to the sunflower family (Asteraceae). The name comes from German *edel* (meaning noble) and *weiß* (meaning white). The scientific name, *Leontopodium* means "lion's paw".



Edelweiss growing out of a rockface

Flowering stalks of edelweiss can grow to a size of 3-20 cm (in cultivation, up to 40 cm). The leaves appear woolly because of the covering of white hairs. The flowers are felted and woolly with white hairs, with characteristic bloom consisting of five to six small yellow flower heads (5 mm) surrounded by leaflets in star form. The flowers are in bloom between July and September. Edelweiss is unequally distributed and prefers rocky limestone places at 2000-2900 m altitude. It is not toxic, and has been used traditionally in folk medicine as a remedy against abdominal and respiratory diseases.

Edelweiss is a protected plant in many countries, including Switzerland, France, Italy, Germany, Austria.

It usually grows in inaccessible places, which is why it is associated in many countries of the alpine region with mountaineering. Its white colour is considered a symbol of purity.

The story goes that once, long, long ago, the Alps were far taller than they are these days. In those days, atop one of the snowcapped, precipice filled mountains lived an Ice Queen. She was said to be fair as snow and hauntingly beautiful. She was served by faithful gnomes, who lived with her on those slopes.

The Queen would sing melodiously and her sound would lure many a shepherd to lose his way in the mountains and come upon her abode. However beautiful she was, she had a flaw; her heart was frozen cold as if it were made of pure ice. She would play for a while with these hapless shepherds who sought her voice. When she got tired of them, the gnomes would toss the men off the cliffs to their death. So she lived, through long ages, alone - except for the companionship of her slaves.

And another shepherd followed her voice. There was nothing different about him, nothing special, nothing noteworthy. But the Ice Queen steadily grew to love this man. She would sing and he would sit awed beside her throne for hours and days.

The gnomes grew jealous, fearing that one day the Ice Queen might marry this mortal. Thus they conspired and threw him headlong into the valley below. Seeing this, for the first and last time, the eyes of the Ice Queen warmed. Her heart melted a little and a single teardrop fell off her eternally beautiful sad cheeks.

It is this tear that has become the edelweiss, the most beautiful flower of the Alps. *from Wikipedia*