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HELVEDIA 

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FLORA IN SWITZERLAND

Lily of the Valley - Maieriisli

The lily-of-the-valley is a poisonous woodland plant native throughout the cool temperate Northern Hemisphere in Asia and Europe.



Lily of the valley

It forms extensive colonies by spreading underground rhizomes. New upright shoots are formed at the ends of stolons in summer. These grow in the spring into new leafy shoots that still remain connected to the other shoots underground. The stems grow to 15-30cm tall, with one or two leaves 10-25cm long. Flowering stems have two leaves and 5-15 flowers on the stem apex. The flowers are white, bell-shaped, 5-10mm diameter, and sweetly scented; flowering is in late spring. The fruit is a small orange-red berry, 5-7mm in diameter that contains a few large whitish to brownish seeds that dry to a clear translucent round bead 1-3mm wide. Plants are self-sterile, and colonies consisting of a single clone do not set seed.

Lily-of-the-valley is a popular garden plant, grown for its scented flowers and for its ground-covering abilities in shady locations. It can spread over a wide area in gardens and can be difficult to contain or remove.

The flower is also known as Our Lady's tears or Mary's tears from Christian legends which sprang from the weeping of the Virgin Mary during the crucifixion of Jesus. According to another legend it originated from Eve's tears after she was driven with Adam from the Garden of Eden.

It is a symbol of humility in religious painting.

In Germanic mythology lilies are associated with the virgin goddess of spring, Ostara. The lily symbolizes life to Pagans and the blooming of lily of the valley flower heralds the feast of Ostara. The sweet fragrance and whiteness of the flowers symbolize the humility and purity of its patron goddess.

Other names include May lily, May bells, lily constancy, ladder-to-heaven. Its scientific name, *Majalis* or *maialis*, means "of or belonging to May".

In the "language of flowers", the lily of the valley signifies the return of happiness. Legend tells of the affection of a lily of the valley for a nightingale that did not come back to the woods until the flower bloomed in May.

All parts of the plant are highly poisonous, including the red berries which may be attractive to children. If ingested—even in small amounts—the plant can cause abdominal pain, vomiting, and a reduced heart rate. Although deadly, the plant has been used as a folk remedy in moderate amounts, and is currently used by herbalists as a restricted herbal remedy. If the plant is touched or handled, hands should be washed before doing anything else.

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