

## Bee-Friendly Flowers Week 9: Vervain



Vervain (*Verbena hastata*) is a native perennial that bursts into bloom in midsummer and continues to flower into the fall. The plant grows with multiple floral spikes that rise above tall slender stems, each spike adorned with a ring of tiny purple flowers that open from the bottom-up - think fairy candles burning with purple flames.

The lore and names associated with the old-world species (*Verbena officinalis*) are truly fascinating, as the plant served as a sacred, medicinal, and even magical herb throughout history. The scientific name of the genus, *Verbena*, is thought to be derived from the Latin, *Herba veneris*, or herb of Venus as it was used in ancient ceremonies honoring the goddess of love and beauty. Priests of early Rome believed the flowers were formed

from the tears of Juno; the source of one common name, *Juno's tears*. They also called it *Herba sacra* and decorated sacrificial animals and alters of worship with it. Later, Christians of the Middle Ages believed vervain was used to dress Christ's wounds on the cross. They used the plant to sprinkle blessed water on the faithful - hence another common name, herb of the cross.

Vervain has an ancient metaphysical connection with the earth. Druids incorporated vervain into purification rites and used it in celebration of the summer solstice and fall equinox. Historians say that these early pagans gathered the *Verbena officinalis*, "when the dog star rises in the dark of morning". The dog star is better known as Sirius, the sky's brightest star. Sirius rises above the eastern horizon in late August just as the predawn darkness gives way to sunrise. It's sometimes called the Dog Star because it's part of the constellation Canis Major, aka Big Dog.

Other spellbinding common names include enchanter's herb, sorcerer's herb, and witch's herb. For those who followed the Wiccan tradition, vervain was a magical treasure. Charms and spells made with enchanter's herb were believed to ward off plagues, snakebites, toothaches, bad storms, wicked spirits, and other unspeakable horrors. Drinking vervain tea allegedly kept vampires at bay and smearing its juices on your body could make wishes come true. The herb was added to love spells to conjure a soulmate or reignite an old flame. It was often woven into bridal wreaths or bridal bouquets to ensure lasting love for the happy couple. Given all its "magical powers", who wouldn't want to have a little vervain sprinkled in their direction?



In the new world, the folklore surrounding our native vervain is more medicinal than magical in nature. There's little evidence of it being used here to ward off vampires, but it was believed to ward off disease. As a folk medicine, early settlers used a cure-all tonic made from the leaves to relieve fevers, respiratory ailments, insomnia, as a poultice for flesh wounds,

and for purging intestinal worms. You name it, vervain cured it! Native Americans also used it as a wellness tea and dried the flowers as a snuff to treat nosebleeds.

Today, both the European and native species grow and hybridize in open, sunny wetlands. Its masses of late summer blooms are very beneficial to pollinators, especially bumblebees as they begin to prepare for the coming of fall. The abundance of flowers and the long bloom period makes it a useful source of both nectar and pollen. It is also a larval host plant for the common buckeye butterfly.

### Duke Farms Connection

At Duke Farms, look for vervain waving their magic wands in the Great Meadow as well as the meadow behind the Visitor Center and in the Pollinator Hoop house. Please don't pick the flowers for your magic spells or smear the herb's juices on your body to make your wishes come true. But hey, you might want to make a wish if you see one. You never know...

**Want to grow vervain in your garden?** Buy plants or seeds from native nurseries and **never collect them from the wild!** [The Native Plant Society of New Jersey](#) is a great resource to help you find where to buy them or to get more information.

### Questions and Answers

1. What is the origin of the genus name *Verbena*?

*Answer: One theory is that the name comes for Herba veneris, meaning Herb of Venus.*

2. How did vervain get this name?

*Answer: It was used as a sacred herb in ancient ceremonies honoring the goddess Venus.*

3. Roman priests believed the flowers were formed from the tears of goddess Juno. What common name is attributed to that use?

*Answer: Juno's tears.*

4. What astronomical observation was used to tell the early pagans when to gather vervain?

*Answer: When Sirius, the Dog Star rose above the horizon just before dawn in late summer.*

5. What common names for *Verbena officinalis* reflect the magical uses of the plant?

*Answer: Enchanter's herb, sorcerer's herb, and witch's herb.*

6. How was vervain in the new world (*Verbena hastata*) used by early settlers?

*Answer: They made a tonic from the leaves to treat all kinds of ailments including fevers, respiratory diseases, insomnia, wounds, and intestinal worms.*

7. What unique medicinal use did Native Americans have for vervain?

*Answer: They dried it and used it as a snuff to stop nosebleeds.*

8. Why is vervain so beneficial to pollinators?

*Answer: Because it blooms late and profusely, vervain offers both nectar and pollen at a time when pollinators, especially bumblebees, are preparing for the coming of fall.*

9. Where can you find vervain at Duke Farms?

*Answer: The Great Meadow, the Meadow behind the Visitor Center, and in the Pollinator House.*



### Additional Resources

- [Johnson Wildflower Center](#)
- [Magical uses of vervain](#)
- [Sirius, the Dog Star](#)
- [USDA Plants Profile for \*Verbena\*](#)
- [USDA Plants Profile for \*Verbena hastata\*](#)
- The Secrets of Wildflowers, Jack Sanders, Lyons Press, Guilford CT, 2003