

# The Edelweiss – Switzerland's national flower?

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Everybody knows the Edelweiss, which grows high in the Alps and is regarded in Switzerland as a national symbol.

But how much do the Swiss really know about the Edelweiss?

Did you know that the Edelweiss is not really a flower as such, but a set of 500 to a thousand tiny florets grouped in several heads (between 2 and 10 of them) surrounded by 5 to 15 white velvety leaves, that it is fertilized by flies, or that it originally comes from the Himalayas and was practically unknown until the late 19th century?

Edelweiss has been cultivated in the Valais since the beginning of the 1990s and is now seen more and more often in private gardens. Today the Edelweiss is particularly in demand from the cosmetic industry. As the years go by, it has been losing its image as a national symbol and taking on new meanings.

The Edelweiss was adopted as a national symbol in the 19th century to give back some luster to a nation that was looking a bit washed out, but no-one knew that this little silvery and hairy flower would become a real alpine celebrity. In fact, over the years, *Leontopodium alpinum* (to give it its scientific name, literally “alpine lion’s tooth”) – has been used to decorate a large number of products made in Switzerland, from postcards to chocolate bars, from folk costumes to sun lotions, and from penknives to purses.

As the emblem of the Alps par excellence, the Edelweiss has many legends associated with it. Perhaps the most famous one tells of a bold suitor who put his own life in danger climbing a steep rock face to pluck the white flower as a gift for his beloved.

The original home of the Edelweiss is in the high plateau of the Himalayas and Siberia, where there currently exist about 30 little-known species in the wild. The plant "migrated" to Europe during the Quaternary ice ages. Today it is found in the alpine region of Switzerland, Italy, France, Austria, Germany, Spain, and the Balkans at an altitude between 1,500 and 3,000 meters. It can no longer be regarded as an endangered species, seeing as it has been cultivated in Valais since the 90s. But it is protected in almost all the countries where it grows. In Switzerland it does not enjoy protection at the national level, but it does in the 14 cantons where it is found, namely Ticino, Graubünden, Valais, Vaud, Fribourg, Bern, Appenzell and the whole of central Switzerland.

"The star of the snows" as the Edelweiss is sometimes called, is also a reminder of a dark past. The Edelweiss was the favorite flower of Adolf Hitler. For that reason it was used as a symbol by the Nazis. In 1935, the German Wehrmacht formed an alpine unit which used the flower as part of the insignia on its uniforms.

Towards the end of the Second World War, however, the Edelweiss became the symbol of the German resistance against Nazism. The "Edelweiss pirates" were groups of young workers who had turned against Nazism and were active as urban guerrillas against the regime. For English-speaking people, the famous "Edelweiss" song in The Sound of Music is also associated with patriotic resistance to Nazism.