

*Aloe*

*Xanthorrhoeaceae*

[*Aloaceae/Asphodelaceae*]

*Aloe* is derived for some authorities from Arabic *alloch* with reference to the medicinal uses of the various species and for others from Hebrew *allal* (bitter).

Initially for Europeans all aloes were believed to grow only on the Island of Socotra (or Soqotra or Suqutra) originally part of Gondwana and now in the north-western Indian Ocean, east of the Horn of Africa. Legend tells how Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) king of Macedonia, was asked by the Greek philosopher and scientist, Aristotle (384-322 BC) to conquer the Island of Socotra because of the sought after sap in aloe's leaves which would have been commercially viable. It would not have been appreciated that the aloe most familiar then and obtained from Socotra was probably *Aloe perryi*, Bombay aloe not *Aloe vera*, ie. aloe more widely known today. Then, of course, Europeans would have been unaware of the fact that the *Aloe* genus boasts species native in southern and eastern Africa, Madagascar, Mauritius, Réunion, Saudi Arabia, Socotra and Yemen. Today Socotra is part of Yemen and in 2008 the Socotran archipelago was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. At that time the archipelago (especially Socotra itself) was the only home for 37% of its 825 plant species, 90% of its reptile species, and 95% of its land snail species. Additionally, 23% of the land and sea birds familiar to the islands breed there and 44% of them are regular migrants, while its coastal waters support 253 reef-building coral species, 730 fish species and 300 crab, lobster and shrimp species. The archipelago is viewed by many as a little smaller version of the Galapagos.

Although *Agave* species may have a similar appearance eg. century plant (*Agave americana*) to species in the *Aloe* genus and both genera are succulents, the *Agaves* are not aloes and unlike *Aloe* species not only have for example more fibrous leaves but also flower once only in their lives, invariably after 10-30 years.

Those species of aloe which are evergreen and thrive in extremely dry areas are able to retain moisture in their leaves for long periods. If a leaf is picked from one of them and left in the sun for several weeks it is unlikely to shrivel up completely. Then if the leaf is immersed in water (even after becoming severely dehydrated) its freshness and plumpness will be restored within a few hours.

For Muslims particularly in Egypt the aloe has been a religious symbol providing protection against evil influences. The plant was (and may still be) hung over the doorway of the home of any Muslim who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca. In the region around Mecca a particular species of aloe known in Arabic as *saber*, a name which refers to the period between burial and resurrection, is a familiar sight in graveyards. It has a low, shrubby evergreen habit and is grown on the edges of graves and facing the epitaph as an emblem of 'patience'. This practice has been followed by Jews living in Cairo too.

Medicinally, different species of the plant are believed to have been in use for at least 3,500 years. One or other of them was known to the ancient Egyptians and the Chinese, as well as the ancient Greeks (certainly from 4 BC) and the Romans. All relied upon the plant for healing the skin whether of burns or wounds, or for skin rashes or sunburn, and they also used it internally for treating headaches and stomach upsets.