

*Aloe*

*Asphodelaceae*

[*Aloeaceae/Liliaceae*]

*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).

Aloes are similar in appearance to century plant (*Agave americana*) which is not an aloe and unlike these aloes has long intervals between flowering periods.

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. If then 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.