

Artemisia abrotanum

[Synonyms : *Artemisia paniculata*, *Artemisia procera*]

SOUTHERNWOOD is a deciduous or semi-evergreen subshrub. Native to southern Europe it has small yellowish-white flowers.

It is also known as *Aaprottimaruna* (Finnish), *Abberaute* (German), *Åbrodd* (Swedish), *Abrotano* (Esperanto, Italian), *Abrótano macho* (Spanish), *Abrotino* (Italian), *Appleringie*, *Artemisa* (Spanish), *Aurone* (French), *Botja* (Portuguese), *Boy's love*, *Broida* (Portuguese), *Cidronella* (Italian), *Citroenkruid* (Dutch), *Eberraute* (German), *Eberreis* (German), *Garderobe* (English, French), *Herba cuquera* (Portuguese), *Kiss-me-quick-and-go*, *Ladies' love*, *Lad's love*, *Maiden's ruin*, *Maid's love*, *Maid's passion*, *Old man*, *Old man's beard*, *Old woman*, *Pelyněk brotan* (Czech), *Sabbath Day posy*, *Sloven weed*, *Sloven wood*, *Smelling wood*, *Sothernwood*, *Southern wormwood*, *Stabwurz* (German), and *Sweet Benjamin*; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of banter, and jest.

Warning – the plant should not be taken internally during pregnancy.

Abrotanum is an ancient Latin name for southernwood meaning 'life-preserving'.

The plant's ability to repel insects is reflected in the old French name *Garde robe* as it was placed amongst clothing to repel moths in particular. The name *Lad's love* arose because young boys used to try and encourage the growth of a beard by smearing their face with a mixture of the ashes of this plant mixed with olive oil (*Olea europaea*) and rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*).

This species was introduced to Britain in 1548 – and to North America in about 1600.

At one time southernwood was said to be a stimulant for a man's libido if it was placed under his pillow (which is a little surprising when it is noted that some authorities suggest putting muslin bags of dried leaves under the pillow to encourage sleep) – and it was included in nosegays exchanged between young lovers. Once it was also grown in herb gardens to keep witches out.

People believed that southernwood could give protection from infection, especially jail fever, and it therefore formed part of the nosegay carried by jailers and court officials. This would also have had the advantage of masking unpleasant smells at a time when sanitation was rudimentary. Posies of southernwood mixed with lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*) were also popular with ladies. Apparently they carried these to church services in order to allay drowsiness. Southernwood was used as a strewing herb too.

In Italy and Spain particularly (where it grows wild) the leaves were used to make a stimulating tea and in the former they have also been eaten raw in salads and prepared as a cooked vegetable.

A yellow dye can be obtained from the stems.

The perfumery industry uses southernwood as an ingredient to provide according to some authorities what are called 'subtle tones'.

Southernwood used to be part of a so-called 'cure' for baldness and can still be found as an ingredient in some hair lotions. Cosmetically southernwood was believed to be able to remove blemishes and pimples.

Medicinally, herbalists used to recommend it (mixed with treacle) as a treatment for children's

worms but its main function was as a remedy for period problems. Southernwood was also used as a remedy for cramp, insomnia, sciatica and urinary disorders. It is the birthday flower for 21st January.