

Artemisia absinthium

[Synonyms : *Absinthium officinale*, *Absinthium vulgare*, *Artemisia absinthium* var. *insipida*, *Artemisia officinalis*, *Artemisia vulgare*]

WORMWOOD is a deciduous shrub. Native to Asia and Europe (including Britain) it has tiny greenish-yellow flowers.

It is also known as *Absent* (Turkish), *Absint* (Czech, Dutch), Absinth (English, German), Absinthe (English, French), Absinthe wormwood, Absinthium, Absinth sagewort, Absinth wormwood, *Absintio* (Spanish), *Absinto* (Portuguese), *Afsanthin* (Arabic, Persian), *Ajenjo* (Spanish), *Ajenjo mayor* (Spanish), *Äkta malört* (Swedish), *Alsem* (Dutch), *Alvine* (French), *Armoise absinthe* (French), *Armoise amère* (French), *Assenzio* (Italian), *Assenzio domestico* (Italian), *Assenzio romano* (Italian), *Assenzio vero* (Italian), *Assenzju* (Maltese), *Bijeli pelin* (Croatian), Boy's love, *Cây ngải đắng* (Vietnamese), *Chlebníček* (Czech), Common sagewort, Common wormwood, *Damar* (Sanskrit), Dian's bud, *Echter Wermut* (German), Girdle of St. John, *Gorski pelin* (Croatian), *Grande absinthe* (French), Green ginger, *Havemalurt* (Danish), *Herbe aux vers* (French), Holy seed, *Hořký stříbrník* (Czech), *Koiruoho* (Finnish), Lad's love, *Lâne* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Losna* (Portuguese), Maddewort, *Mali* (Finnish), *Malört* (Swedish), *Malurt* (Danish, Norwegian), Mingwort, Mugwort, *Ngải áp xanh* (Vietnamese), *Ngải đắng* (Vietnamese), *Niga yomogi* (Japanese), Old man, Old woman, *Palina pravá* (Slovak), *Pelůň* (Czech), *Pelyněk pravý* (Czech), Perennial wormwood, *Piolun* (Polish), *Polyn' gor'kaia* (Russian), St. John's girdle, *Sheeh* (Urdu), *Sintro* (Portuguese), *Vermouth* (French), *Vilayati afsantin* (Hindi), Waremouth, Warmot, *Wermud Lwyd* (Welsh), Wermout, Wermud, *Wermut* (German), *Wermuth* (German), Wormit, Wormod, and *Yang ai* (Chinese); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of absence (leaves), affection, calamity, false judgement, and sorrow.

Apart from rue (*Ruta graveolens*) this is the most bitter of herbs.

Warning – a poisonous plant that if taken to excess can cause thirst, dizziness, ear tingling, muscular power loss, vertigo, cramps, intoxication, delirium, general paralysis and severe brain damage, and if taken habitually can cause convulsions, restlessness and vomiting. It should not be taken internally during pregnancy. Records show it can cause paralysis in horses.

Absinthium is an old Latin name for wormwood (this species).

One theory for the common name Wormwood is that it is a corruption of the German *Wermut* and *Vermouth* is an 18th Century French variation. This reflects its medicinal use for expelling intestinal worms. Another explanation accounts for the name by reference to a legend in which it is claimed that the plant sprang up in the path of the Serpent as it slithered away from the Garden of Eden after its expulsion.

Both the Chinese and the North American Indian tribes of New Mexico and British Columbia are known to have valued its medicinal qualities for hundreds and hundreds of years. Wormwood was also familiar to the ancient Egyptians as witnessed in a description of it found in a papyrus of about 1600 BC. Ancient Greeks dedicated it to Artemis, the huntress and goddess of the moon, and some believed that wormwood mixed in wine would prevent drunkenness. For some authorities too wormwood was one of the Nine

Sacred Herbs respected by the Anglo-Saxons.

Wormwood is said to be have been a symbol of sorrow and calamity in the biblical era which is perhaps appropriate in view of its poisonous qualities.

Folklore on the one hand contended that wormwood could deprive a man of courage, and on the other that it was an effective repellent against goblins that appeared in the night. It was also an ingredient in some love charms.

In the Middle Ages wormwood was not only used as a strewing herb but was also placed amongst clothes, as it was believed it had moth and flea repellent qualities. The English agricultural writer, Thomas Tusser (c.1520-c.1580) wrote in his famous *Five Hundredth Pointes of Good Husbandrie*

While wormwood hath seed get a handful or twain,
To save against March, to make flea to refrain,
Where chamber is swept and wormwood is strowne,
No flea for his life dare abide to be known.

As a fly repellent it was also hung in bunches through the house, and it was mixed with ink to stop mice and rats enjoying a meal of paper. (The Okanagan-Colville North American Indians put branches of wormwood under their mattresses as a general insect and bedbug repellent.)

Wormwood received the attention of the famous English playwright and poet, William Shakespeare (1564-1616). It is mentioned in several plays including *Love's Labour's Lost*.

..... you on all estates will execute,
That lie within the mercy of your wit:
To weed this wormwood from your fruitful brain.
And, therewithal, to win me, if you please,
Without the which I am not to be won,
You shall this twelve month term,

But wormwood's notoriety only emerged from the shadows in the early 19th Century when it became the base ingredient of absinthe. Many authorities claim that absinthe has been made in the Czechoslovakian region of central Europe for centuries while others declare that it is Switzerland where the first alcoholic wormwood drink recipes were formulated. It is told how a Frenchman named Dr. Pierre Ordinaire escaped the French Revolution (it began in 1789) by crossing the French border and settling in a Swiss village called Couvet. Here he helped patients in the area and in 1792 developed a cure-all (based on wormwood and other local plants – see below) which attracted some popularity. He died shortly afterwards and left the cure-all recipe to two Couvet sisters called Henriod. They sold it to a Frenchman, a Major Dubied. Enter the Swiss Henri-Louis Pernod (died 1850) who had married the Major's daughter. He and the Major set up a distillery in Couvet and sold absinthe as an alcoholic drink. The venture proved to be so successful that in 1805 he established Pernod Fils and his French factory in Pontarlier. The recipe's main constituents were aniseed (*Pimpinella anisum*), fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare* var. *dulce*), hyssop (*Hyssopus officinalis*) and lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*). But these were supplemented by other plants including Roman wormwood (*Artemisia pontica*) and more significantly wormwood itself. This made a green drink that to improve its appearance further some producers adulterated by adding a poisonous salt, trichloride of antimony. They were completely unaware that even before this addition the drink was a lethal cocktail. It then became the practice to drink absinthe with water. The water was poured over a lump of sugar through a strainer into the liquor. This not only clouded the drink but also made it turn slightly yellow. Imbibers were seen to experience symptoms similar to some epileptic attacks, and to suffer personal deterioration and addiction. Nevertheless

the enthusiasm for absinthe continued to grow being fostered no doubt by its popularity amongst French artists and intellectuals. Many of the artists chose absinthe as a topic, for example Edgar Degas (1834-1917) who in 1876 painted *The Absinthe Drinkers*, Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) in 1887 produced *Still Life with Absinthe*, Édouard Manet's (1832-1883) *The Absinthe Drinker* appeared in 1889, and *The Glass and the Bottle* came from Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) in 1912. Among the literati were reportedly the French poets, Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891) and Paul Verlaine (1844-1896), as well as Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), there was the English writer and magician, Aleister Crowley (1875-1947), and the Irish included their famous playwright, poet and wit Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). From the other side of the Atlantic there were the writers, Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961), Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) and Jack London (1876-1916). Consumption rose to such levels that in 1913 records show that the French alone drank 40 million litres of it. (It came to be called *La Fée Verte*, The Green Fairy or Green Goddess – or just *La Fée*, The Fairy.) However during this period the physical effect of the drink was causing concern and after investigation it was found eventually that wormwood was the culprit. The plant contains hallucinogens and santonin both of which can affect the nervous system. In France on 16th March 1915 absinthe was banned. The Pernod factory replaced the drink with the Pernod still drunk today and this has an increased amount of aniseed – but no wormwood. [Records show that the addition of wormwood to alcohol was not confined to Europe. In the late 19th Century and well on into 20th Century many illicit stills sprang up hidden in the backwoods of the United States and Canada – especially during Prohibition (1920-1933) in the United States when the manufacture, transport and sale of alcoholic drinks was banned. Authorities have noted that in Louisiana in the United States if nowhere else the locals kept the best distillation for themselves and often added an infusion of wormwood to a batch of 'white lightning' destined for a stranger to give it extra potency.] Other countries besides France now ban the use of wormwood in wine and Germany has prohibited vermouth brandy since 1923. However there are countries where it is still used as an aromatic bitters in some alcoholic drinks, including Vermouth and various other apéritifs – and in strictly controlled amounts it is sometimes used to replace some hops in brewing beer.

The shrub was a source of medicines for several North American Indian tribes. The Mohicans prescribed a leaf infusion for expelling some worms and the Chippewa applied a boiled plant top compress to bad sprains. Records suggest that the Okanagan-Colville Indians favoured this plant especially as they not only used it to treat some stomach upsets, colds, tuberculosis and some venereal diseases but they also used it during childbirth and in handling broken limbs.

Medicinally, European herbalists used to recommend wormwood in the treatment of nervous diseases, jaundice, colds, rheumatism, bruises, sprains and loss of appetite, and also as a heart stimulant and a pain reliever during childbirth. (It is said that the Greek physician, Hippocrates (c.460-377 or 359 BC) prescribed a wormwood potion to ease rheumatism and jaundice.) Today under supervision it can sometimes be prescribed as a digestive stimulant and also for easing abdominal wind and treating intestinal worms – and it can be used to treat malaria as well. It is also used in homoeopathy

It is the birthday flower for 29th April.