

Artemisia dracunculus

[Synonyms : *Artemisia aromatica*, *Artemisia dracunculoides*, *Artemisia dracunculoides* var. *dracunculina*, *Artemisia dracunculus* subsp. *glauca*, *Artemisia glauca*, *Artemisia glauca* var. *dracunculina*, *Artemisia redowski*, *Oligosporus dracunculus*, *Oligosporus dracunculus* subsp. *dracunculinus*, *Oligosporus dracunculus* subsp. *glaucus*]

TARRAGON is a perennial. Native to North America, Asia (particularly Siberia) and eastern Europe, it has small yellowish or whitish-green flowers.

It is also known as Biting dragon, *Dragon* (Dutch, German, Swedish), *Dragoncello* (Italian), *Dragoncillo* (Spanish), Dragon mugwort, Dragon's herb, Dragon plant, Dragon wormwood, Dragonwort, *Estragão* (Portuguese), *Estragon* (German, French), *Estragón* (Spanish), *Estragone* (Italian), *Estragono* (Esperanto), False tarragon, French tarragon, Green sagewort, *Herbe au dragon* (French), Linear-leaved wormwood, Little dragon, Little tarragon, *Pelyněk estragon* (Czech), *Rakuuna* (Finnish), Russian tarragon, *Serpentaria* (Italian), Silky wormwood, *Tarkhoon* (Urdu), *Tarkhuñ* (Arabic), Wild tarragon, and Wormwood; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of 'share'.

Oil is extracted from the flowering plant.

Dracunculus is the diminutive derived from Greek *draconto-* (dragon) component meaning 'little dragon' which was a herbalist's description of the coiled snake-like root.

The common name Tarragon is likely to be a corruption of the Arabic *tarkhun* through the Spanish *taragoncia*.

The origins of tarragon have spawned legend. One of these suggests that flax seed (*Linum*) buried in the root of garden radish (*Raphanus sativus*) or squill (*Drimia*) will produce tarragon.

Tarragon is thought to have been little known to the ancient Greek and the Roman civilizations. Some authorities suggest that Mongols introduced tarragon to the Near East in the mid-12th Century and that the Crusaders then helped to spread it through western Europe. Yet records indicate that both Rhazes (c.850-923 or 932) the Persian physician and alchemist, and the Arabian philosopher and physician, Avicenna (980-1037) were familiar with the plant.

In the 13th Century Ibn al Baithar mentioned that in his lifetime young shoots of tarragon were popular as a vegetable in Syria (cooked or raw), and he himself believed that the taste of offensive medicine could be muted if tarragon leaves were chewed before it was swallowed. Today Syrians still enjoy eating the young shoots. The plant was mentioned as a flavouring by a 13th Century Spanish botanist, and it is believed to have reached France in the 14th Century. In England in 1597 tarragon was referred to in a herbal written by the barber-surgeon, John Gerard (1545-1612). In Europe and North America today (less so in the latter) tarragon is used as flavouring particularly with chicken and fish, and in salads, pickles and vinegars. For many it is also a useful alternative to salt, pepper, vinegar or garlic. The drinks industry uses tarragon as an ingredient in herbal beverages as well.

When still Prince of Wales, George IV (1762-1830) of Britain was so convinced that he owed his life to tarragon (an extravagant claim in the eyes of many, including George III his father) that he gave the French chef, Marie Antoine Carême (1784-1833) a gold snuffbox.

He had been seriously ill with violent indigestion from over-indulgence and it was Monsieur Carême who prescribed a diet in which tarragon was the only seasoning. The seeds provided food for the Luiseño North American Indian tribe, and some of the Apache tribes made a beverage from the leaves and young stems.

The Okanagan-Colville tribe spread out its leafy branches for drying salmon and also layered them (not least for their insect repellent qualities) between stored fish. The tribe also burnt branches to repel mosquitoes (as did the Shuswap) and this may go part way towards an explanation of why the Costanoan Indians used the burning branches as torches on night fishing expeditions. Some of the Keresan Pueblo Indians also used it in solution on bedding to counter bedbugs. The leaves were placed in babies' cradles in the Okanagan-Colville tribes primarily as padding and incidentally for their insect repellent qualities and their ability to keep the infants cool during the Summer heat.

In the Thompson Indian tribe horses' leg injuries were treated with tarragon.

The plant gained respect in the Shuswap tribe who believed that it had the power to keep illness at bay. Quite a few North American Indian tribes found medicinal uses for the plant including the Luiseño Indians of southern California. Records indicate that the Okanagan-Colville, Thompson, Flathead and Kawaiisu Indians all used it in some way to treat rheumatism. The Flathead and Okanagan-Colville used it as a remedy for sores, and the latter also included it in their repertoire for easing headaches. Both the Thompson and Sanpoil Indians used tarragon to treat colds and the Shuswap tribe employed it during childbirth. It was an ingredient in remedies for various eye problems (including snow-blindness) for the Crow tribe and the Costanoan Indians used it not only for dysentery but also for easing babies' wind.

Today a flowering plant extract is used by the perfumery industry as an ingredient in spicy oriental perfumes.

Medicinally, in Europe it was one of the 'dragon' herbs that was believed to be able to cure snake bites, and later the root was chewed to ease toothache. Today it can be used for the latter purpose, and also as an aid to digestion.