

*Athyrium*

*Woodsiaceae*

[*Dryopteridaceae*]

*Athyrium* is for some authorities derived from Greek *athuros* (spiritless) with reference to botanical characteristics of lady-fern (*Athyrium filix-femina*), and for others from Greek *anthyros* (doorless) or *anthoros* (breeding well), both the latter in relation to the reproductive cycle and spores.

Ferns generally are said to be a symbol of fascination, magic and sincerity.

Superstitions abound around them. Because the seeds of some cannot be seen by the naked eye it was assumed that this fact would also make anyone carrying that species invisible. On the other hand country people in some parts of England believed that the invisible seed could be seen at the precise moment St. John was born in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD on St. John's Eve (24<sup>th</sup> June) and therefore that this was the best time to harvest it. It is reported that this 'invisibility' superstition was maintained even as recently as 1870 in Lancashire, in England, where adherers were convinced that swallowing seed collected on the family *Bible* would confer this state. (In unbroken silence the mature bracken had to be bent over with a hazel (*Corylus avellana*) twig so that, untouched by human hand, the seeds – visible or invisible – could fall straight onto a pewter dish.) The English bard, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) wound this reputation for invisibility into Part 1 of *Henry IV* when at the dead of night the Chamberlain is quipping with Gadshill in an inn yard in Rochester and the latter says

.....we have the receipt of fern-seed, we walk invisible.

to which Chamberlain replies

Nay, by my faith; I think you are more beholding to the night, than to fern-seed for your walking invisible.

The root of a male plant featured in another superstition. This required that the root be dug up at Midsummer, carved into the shape of a human hand, baked in an oven and then carried on one's person. Once prepared it was called 'St. John's hand' or 'dead man's hand' and was not only a personal safeguard but also a protection for land and home from witches and evil spirits.

When fern was cut at the root the veins were supposed to show – the initials 'C' or 'JC' which were held to signify 'Christ' or 'Jesus Christ' and foretell good fortune, or the initial of the name of a future wife or husband, or that of the owner of the land on which the plant originally grew – according to the tradition of the area.

Because St. Patrick (5<sup>th</sup> Century) is supposed to have banished snakes from Ireland he is believed to have disliked them. This may have some bearing however upon the reason for his alleged curse on ferns there as the Irish used to believe that you would be followed by reptiles if you wore a sprig of fern. In England (particularly Staffordshire) it was not uncommon to find that ferns bore a general reputation for ill-luck.

In contrast some species of fern were used in love potions. The minute fern seed bitten in Spring would guarantee the absence of toothache for one year, and sprains and inflammation could be healed by fern gathered during the period of a waning moon.