

Balsamita major

[Synonyms : *Balsamita vulgaris*, *Chrysanthemum balsamita*, *Chrysanthemum balsamita* subsp. *majus*, *Chrysanthemum majus*, *Leucanthemum balsamita*, *Tanacetum balsamita*]

ALECOST is a perennial. Native to south-western Asia, it has small white-petalled, yellow-centred flowers.

It is also known as Alespice, *Balsamblad* (Swedish), Balsam herb, Balsamita (English, Spanish), *Balsamkraut* (German), *Balzamito* (Esperanto), *Baume de coq* (French), Beaver tongue, Bible leaf, Bible-leaf mace, Bitter buttons, *Bonerba* (Italian), Camphor plant, Coastmary, Cologne plant, Cost, *Costa* (Italian), Coster Mary, Costmary, Costmary chrysanthemum, Coursemary, French sage, Garden balsam, Goose-tongue, *Herbe Sainte-Marie* (French), Lady's balsam, Lady's flower, Lady's herb, Lavender, *Luktsalvia* (Swedish), Mace, *Marienbalsam* (German), *Marienblatt* (German), *Maří list balšámový* (Czech), Maudlin, Mint geranium, *Palsamipäivänkakkara* (Finnish), Patagonian mint, *Rainfarn* (German), Sweet Mary, Tongue plant, and *Wurmkraut* (German); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of impatience.

Warning – the pollen can cause an allergic reaction for some people.

Major is derived from Latin *maior* (greater) meaning 'greater, bigger or larger'.

The Cost in some of the common names comes from the Greek *kostos* meaning a 'spicy oriental plant'. Thus alecost is a spicy oriental herb for flavouring ale (one of its primary uses). The plant was also viewed as a woman's spicy aromatic as it was taken to ease childbirth and it was dedicated to Mary Magdalene (1st Century). The two explanations contribute to the meaning of the common name, Costmary. Puritan North American settlers kept a leaf in their Bible not only to scent the Book but also so that it was available to be chewed (so it is said) to appease appetite during a long sermon – thus the name Bible leaf.

Alecost was one of the at least 36 ingredients used by Mithridates (c.132-63 BC), the 1st Century King of Pontus (northern Turkey), in a poison antidote (known as Antidotum Mithridaticum or Theriac) which he took daily to acquire an overall immunity – an important consideration if it is remembered that he gained his position of power by poisoning his opposition.

It was introduced to England in the 16th Century and was used for strewing, and it was also sought after for scenting linen. It had rapidly become so popular that by the middle of that Century, according to authors of the period, it was a common sight growing in country gardens there.

The plant was used to flavour ale and wine. At the beginning of the 21st Century the sparing use of the leaves (they have a sharp taste) as a culinary flavouring appears to be reviving a little.

After its introduction to North America the Iroquois Indians absorbed it into their range of medicinal plants and prescribed it for easing earache.

Medicinally, alecost was recognized in the English Pharmacopoeia for around 100 years until 1788 and herbalists used to recommend it for treating dysentery, fluid retention, catarrh, headaches and liver complaints. It was also an ingredient in ointments for treating sores, ulcers and other skin ailments.

