

Crithmum maritimum

ROCK SAMPHIRE is a succulent shrub. Native to Europe and the Mediterranean (particularly Atlantic coastlines), it has small scented indistinct, greenish-yellow flowers. It is also known as *Bacile* (French), *Busbies il-bahar* (Maltese), *Camphire*, *Casse-pierre* (French), *Corn Carw'r Môr* (Welsh), *Crest marine*, *Crête marine* (French), *Criste marine* (French), *Erba corda* (Italian), *Erba di San Pietro* (Italian), *Finocchio di mare* (Italian), *Finochio marino* (Spanish), *Herbe de Saint Pierre* (French), *Meerfenchel* (German), *Merifenkoli* (Finnish), *Motar přímořský* (Czech), *Passper*, *Perce-pierre* (French), *Pèrche-pièrre* (Channel Islander-Guernsey and Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Perrexil* (Portuguese), *Peter's cress*, *Pousse-pierre* (French), *Rock semper*, *Saltmärke* (Swedish), *Samper*, *Samphire*, *Sanpetra* (Italian), *Sea fennel*, *Sea samphire*, *Seefenchel* (German), *Semper*, *Shamsher*, *Strand-Fennikel* (Danish), *Strandsilja* (Swedish), and *True samphire*.

Essential oil can be extracted from any part of the plant.

Maritimum is Latin (of the sea) meaning 'coastal, or of the sea or seaside'.

Authorities point out that the name Samphire is a corruption of 'Saint Peter' with whom the plant was associated.

It was known to the ancient Greeks and the 1st Century Greek physician, Disocorides, records that it was eaten boiled or raw and also preserved in brine. The plant was eaten similarly by the Romans.

Rock samphire was dedicated to St. Peter (1st Century), the fisherman and one of the Twelve Apostles, because it enjoys growing near the sea.

Rarely seen today rock samphire was not only collected, often hazardously, for local use from its natural home on the coastal rocks (often half way down sea cliffs where the harvesters reached it by dangling from ropes). It was also sent in barrels of brine to the towns and in the 17th Century it became so popular in England and France that despite its specific natural habitat it could also have been seen cultivated in and collected from herb gardens inland. The street vendors in London sold rock samphire but the old London cry used the name 'crest marine'. (Apparently at the turn of the 20th and 21st Centuries a local man was still trading it on the streets of King's Lynn in Norfolk. Authorities have noted that he called out

Any samphire, you ladies?

as he guided his loaded horse and cart through the streets.) Records show that in 1821 North American herb gardens also included rock samphire among the plants.

The leaves, boiled with vinegar and spices, made a strong, aromatic pickle that is occasionally cooked even today. [Rock samphire, freshly harvested from the Sandringham Estate, was on the menu at the 1981 wedding of Charles (1948-) and Diana, the Prince and Princess of Wales (1961-1997).]

William Shakespeare (1564-1616), the famous English playwright and poet, refers to rock samphire in *King Lear*. When Edgar attired in his lunatic peasant clothes is guiding his blinded father, the Earl of Gloucester, on the Dover cliffs he says

.....stand still.

How fearful

And dizzy 't is, to cast one's eyes so low!
The crows, and choughs, that wing the midway air,
Show scarce so gross as beetles; half way down
Hangs one that gathers samphire; dreadful trade!
Methinks, he seems no bigger than his head.
The fishermen that walk upon the beach,
Appear like mice;

One story that defies the adage 'a little knowledge is a dangerous thing' tells of a shipwreck in the English Channel, off the Sussex coast in England. The survivors found themselves marooned on a large rock and had to assess the odds between attempting to swim ashore and remaining on the rock that appeared to be within range of the rising tide that would mean they could be swept away. But one of the ship's officers saw rock samphire growing on the rock and recalled that the plant will grow where it gets covered in sea spray but will never survive where it could be submerged by the seawater. They remained on the rock safely until rescued.

The essential oil is used today commercially by the food and pharmaceutical industries for flavouring, and also by the perfumery industry.

Medicinally, herbalists believed the plant was a remedy for kidney stones, digestive disorders and urinary ailments. Today it is still considered to be effective as a protection against scurvy.