

*Dryopteris filix-mas*

[Synonyms : *Aspidium filix-mas*, *Lastrea filix-mas*, *Polypodium filix-mas*, *Polystichum filix-mas*]

**MALE-FERN** is a deciduous or semi-evergreen fern. Native to northern temperate areas it has large tapering, green fronds.

It is also known as *Almindelig Mangeløv* (Danish), *Alvejuuri* (Finnish), *Aspidium*, *Basket fern*, *Bear's paw root*, *Fern*, *Fougère male* (French), *Gemeiner Wurmfarne* (German), *Gewöhnlicher Wurmfarne* (German), *Kaprad' samec* (Czech), *Knotty brake*, *Male shield fern*, *Male woodfern*, *Männlicher Wurmfarne* (German), *Paprad' samčia* (Slovak), *Sweet brake*, and *Träjon* (Swedish).

Warning – large doses can cause delirium, nausea, vomiting, blindness and death (from cardiac and respiratory failure). It must only be used under the supervision of a qualified practitioner. It must not be taken internally if pregnant or suffering from heart disorders. In Britain this is classified as a pharmacy medicine only available through a registered pharmacist. It is poisonous for animals.

*Filix-mas* is derived from Latin *filix* (fern) and *mas* (male) components.

In Europe in the Middle Ages especially the roots were carved into good luck charms by cutting off five of the curved, finger-like fronds so that the final result had some resemblance to a hand. It was believed to be able to give considerable protection against bad luck, witches and devils, and was called *Dead Man's Hand*, *Lucky Hand*, or *St. John's Hand*. The latter name came about because it was thought to be at its most potent if fashioned on *St. John's Eve* (23<sup>rd</sup> June) when it could be fumigated in the fires lit that night to purify the air of evil spirits. It is said that the Mongol conqueror, *Genghis Khan* (c.1162-1227), carried a *Dead Man's Hand* as a lucky charm.

In North America the male-fern's underground stems provided food, eaten raw or steamed, for the *Bella Coola* Indians – who apparently included it as part of their diet particularly as a slimming aid.

Although it is now considered to be poisonous for animals, the boiled and strained roots were once used in veterinary medicine to treat liver-fluke in sheep.

The medicinal qualities of the plant have been known for centuries. For the Greek philosopher, *Theophrastus* (c.372-c.287 BC) and his compatriot, *Dioscorides*, who wrote *De materia medica* in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD, the male-fern provided a treatment for worms, and it was also referred to for this purpose by the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Roman natural historian, *Pliny the Elder* (23-79). Nearer the present day *John Gerard* (1545-1612), the English barber-surgeon and herbalist (the latter as a charlatan for many authorities), repeats this in his own records too, although it seems that this remedy fell by the wayside in Europe for some centuries, especially during the Middle Ages. Its revived popularity on the European Continent was then apparent in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. 'Worm remedies', particularly those made by German chemists, included the male-fern as an ingredient. Records show that the reputation of these cures at this time, not least among European royal families such as those of *Frederick the Great of Prussia* (1712-1786), and *Louis XV* (1710-1774) of France, was such that they could command very high sums. Apparently however it was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century that the most desirable method of application of male-fern

(fresh instead of dried extracts) was identified and its effectiveness satisfactorily proven. Meanwhile on the other side of the Atlantic the fern also provided a source of medicine for several North American Indian tribes. While the Cherokee took a root infusion for worms, the Bella Coola prescribed the underground stem as an antidote for shellfish or plant poisoning. Medicinally, under the supervision of a qualified practitioner the plant is still used today to kill and expel intestinal tapeworms. There are however other related ferns which are considered to be more effective now. For the old herbalists tapeworms were not its only fort . They also recommended this root as a remedy for rickets in children and as an ointment for healing wounds.