

Eupatorium

Compositae
[*Asteraceae*]

Eupatorium commemorates an ancient warrior and herbalist, Mithridates VI (c.132-63 BC) King of Pontus (northern Turkey), who was also named Eupator to distinguish him from his father. The last of his three Mithridatic Wars with Rome in which he was finally defeated by Pompey in 65 BC extended over 10 years. At his height Mithridates governed 20 odd nations and was said to be fluent in all their languages. He is reputed to have experimented on himself with different plants in order not only to identify their medicinal benefits but also, legend contends, to increase the immunity of his body to poisoning (understandable when one remembers that he killed his siblings, except his sister who he married, in order to secure his throne which he assumed in 120 BC). To achieve that immunity he is said to have developed, and taken daily, an all-embracing poison antidote which contained at least 36 ingredients (of which agrimony, *Agrimonia eupatoria*, was one). This came to be known as Antidotum Mithridaticum or Theriac and was used, some claim, for 1900 years after his death and has since been referred to in poetry and prose. It was also the forerunner of potions that were eventually known as ‘electuaries’ and until the mid-19th Century these expensive panaceas (with their secret ingredients) were available throughout Europe under various names. His legendary anti-poisoning régime is relevant with regard to other legends about his death (which has also been the inspiration for a play by the French poet and dramatist, Racine (1639-1699), and an opera composed by Mozart (1756-1791), as well as historical novels). When his capture by Rome was imminent after the end of the Third Mithridatic War it would seem that he attempted suicide by taking poison (having in one version first given the drug successfully to those around him). But his antidote régime had worked too well and his body resisted the poison so, according to whichever legend followed, already weakened he had to ask one of his officers to complete the task with a sword or, unasked, some of those he had ordered to kill members of his family used their weapons to execute him too.