

Hyssopus officinalis

[Synonyms : *Hyssopus aristata*, *Hyssopus vulgaris*]

HYSSOP (Dutch, English) is a semi-evergreen subshrub. Native to temperate western Asia and to central and southern Europe, it has small blue flowers.

It is also known as *Echter Ysop* (German), Garden hyssop, *Hinojo* (Spanish), *Hisopo* (Spanish), *Hysope* (French), *Iisoppi* (Finnish), *Isop* (German, Swedish), *Issopo* (Italian), *Issopo celestino* (Italian), *Ysop* (German), *Yzop lékařský* (Czech), *Zufah* (Urdu), and *Zufah-yabis* (Hindi); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of cleanliness, holiness, humility, and purification.

The flowers are pollinated by bees.

Warning – hyssop should be used in small doses of no more than 1-2 g. twice a day. It should not be taken internally during pregnancy or if experiencing high blood pressure. The essence (essential oil) should not be used in aromatherapy on highly-strung patients as it can cause epileptic symptoms, nor should it be used by epileptic sufferers.

Officinalis means ‘of the shop (usually the apothecary’s or herbalist’s)’. Certain plants used for medicinal purposes, whether of actual or legendary value, were kept readily available and acquired this name

Often mentioned in the *Bible* (if translations are to be believed) the name Hyssop is said to come from the Hebrew *Esob*. However some authorities contend that this refers to marjoram (*Origanum majorana*) not hyssop as the latter cannot be found wild in Palestine.

Hyssop (if it was that) was used by the ancient Greeks to purify temples, and it also performed a significant role in the ritual bathing of lepers. (Recent research shows that penicillin could be produced from the leaf mould and this antibiotic quality would lend some practical advantage to the latter practice.)

In addition to ritual and medicinal uses, the plant was used to make wine (according to Pliny (23-79), the celebrated Roman natural historian), and when the Benedictines brought it into central Europe in the 1st Century it came to be used as a flavouring in their liqueurs. Hyssop was also being grown by the Cistercian monks in the 15th Century if not 200 years before that.

Furthermore it has long been an ingredient in cosmetics. A distillation was used by the Persians to enhance skin colour.

Sacred associations are well illustrated in a believed reference to the plant in the Book of Psalms (51:7) in the Old Testament of the *Bible*. (Some authorities point out, as already mentioned, that hyssop was not growing in the area of Palestine at the time in question and although alternatives such as capers (*Capparis spinosa*), marjoram (*Origanum majorana*), mint (*Mentha*), oregano (*Origanum vulgare*), rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) or savory (*Satureja hortensis*) have been put forward the actual plant has not as yet been identified with any certainty.)

Hyssop was used as a strewing herb in Europe.

During the Middle Ages the plant was a popular flavouring in stuffings and soups. Today its leaves can be used in fruit dishes, and the dried flowers can sometimes be seen as an edible floating decoration on soup.

The famous English poet, Edmund Spenser (c.1552-1599) referred to hyssop as
Sharp isope good for green wounds remedies

and his peer, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) mentions the plant in *Othello* when Iago gives a dissertation on healthy living.

.....Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners; so that if we will plant nettles, or sow lettuce; set hyssop, and weed up thyme; supply it with one gender of herbs, or distract it with many;

Hyssop came to be known on the other side of the Atlantic by a few North American Indian tribes. The Cherokee according to authorities included it in their medicinal repertoire as a treatment for colds, coughs, fever, some period problems and various lung disorders.

Today the oil is used to make liqueurs eg. Chartreuse, Benedictine, as well as by the perfumery industry in eau-de-cologne and oriental-types of perfumes eg. Fougère, Chypre, and by the cosmetics industry.

Medicinally, herbalists recommended hyssop for the treatment of tonsillitis and asthma and as a gargle to ease toothache. However it seems to have been an external remedy primarily for healing bruises and wounds, as well as for easing the pain of muscular rheumatism.

Today despite its medicinal and culinary qualities it is usually found as a decorative garden plant, although it can be used for treating bronchitis, coughs and colds.

It is the birthday flower for 14th January.