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Juniperus communis

[Synonyms : *Juniperus canadensis*, *Juniperus canadensis* var. *depressa*, *Juniperus canadensis* var. *montana*, *Juniperus canadensis* subsp. *nana*, *Juniperus canadensis* var. *saxatilis*, *Juniperus densa*, *Juniperus nana*, *Juniperus sibirica*]

JUNIPER is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to northern temperate regions (particularly the Mediterranean, North America, north-western Himalayas and Norway to the Russian Republic), it has small greenish-yellow flowers.

It is also known as *Aaraar* (Hindi), *Abhal* (Urdu), *Adi ardiç* (Turkish), *Almindelig ene* (Danish), Bastard killer, *Betar* (Kashmiri, Punjabi), *Borievka obyčajná* (Slovak), Common juniper, Dwarf juniper, *En* (Swedish), *Enebro* (Spanish), *Gemeiner Wachholder* (German), *Genévrier* (French), *Genévrier commun* (French), *Genièvre* (French), *Ginepro* (Italian), Ground juniper, Hack matak, *Harilik kadakas* (Estonian), *Haubera* (Hindi), *Havusha* (Bengali), *Heide-Wacholder* (German), Himalayan pencil tree, Horse savin, *Jalovec obecny* (Czech), *Jałowiec pospolity* (Polish), *Jeneverbes* (Dutch), Juniper berries, *Junipero ordinara* (Esperanto), *Kataja* (Finnish), *Kedros* (Greek), *Közönséges boróka* (Hungarian), Melmot berries, *Navadni brin* (Slovenian), *Paprastasis kadagys* (Lithuanian), *Petthri* (Punjabi), *Vapusha* (Sanskrit), *Wacholder* (German), and *Zimbro-rasteiro* (Portuguese); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of asylum, fecundity, longevity, protection, remembrance, and succour.

The ripe fleshy berry-like cones are harvested in mid-Autumn by beating branches over a cloth and these are then dried in good ventilation. Cones and branches are distilled. Essence is extracted from the branches and is known as Juniper oil or Cade oil.

Warning – the cones should not be used if suffering from kidney disorders. Juniper should not be taken during pregnancy. The volatile oil can be used internally only under prescription from a qualified practitioner. Overdoses can cause inflammation and convulsions. It can be poisonous for animals.

Juniper is considered to be threatened in the wild in Britain.

Communis means ‘common, general or growing with’.

In ancient Greek and Roman times it was believed that the gods of the Underworld recognized the pungent smoke from the green branches as incense. This general idea was a common thread in the superstitions in Europe in the medieval period. It was believed that the odour had the power to repel evil spirits (for which reason juniper was hung in Scottish cowsheds, and the cones were burnt at funerals) and to smoke out witches. The Welsh believed that death in the family would follow, particularly your own, if you cut down a juniper tree. In some areas it was grown near the door as it was said to prevent witches crossing the threshold as they were distracted by having to count all the tiny, needle-like evergreen leaves before attempting to enter. Juniper was also believed to be able to give protection against epidemic diseases and in infusion it was believed to be able to give back youth.

Christian legend tells how the Virgin Mary hid behind a juniper bush with the baby Jesus when evading Herod.

In the 16th and 17th Centuries juniper was one of the favourite shrubs used in England for the then fashionable pursuit of topiary ie. it was considered ideal for clipping into fantastic

(and not so fantastic) shapes. The tree was also a popular strewing plant and was prized for burning (it is understood that Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603) had juniper burnt in her bedchamber as a fumigant).

The small and glossy bluish-black berry-like cones (which are understood to have a stronger flavour the nearer the equator they grow) can take up to 3 years to ripen. They are collected commercially, primarily to flavour a highly aromatic brandy or gin that in Belgium is known as *péquet*, in France it is called *genièvre* (which is also a French name for 'juniper'), and in Holland it is named *genever* or *schiedam*. While in Sweden, juniper has been used to make a 'health' beer.

The cones were once used as a spice (an alternative to pepper (*Piper nigrum*) – or its adulterant), and when roasted provided a substitute for coffee. Cooking spoons were made of the aromatic, light brown wood as it was thought that their use would add some of the juniper flavour to the food.

North-western American Indian tribes used juniper 'berries' to flavour roast meat, stews or salmon. The Thompson tribe made a kind of tea with small pieces of branch, and on the eastern side of the Continent authorities note that the Anticosti Indians made a fermented drink with the fruit and branches.

The Malecite Indians infused pieces of branch for a hair wash, and the Tanana Indians used the branches in their steam baths. Superstitions also surrounded juniper in some Indian tribes. Members of the Okanagan-Colville used a body wash to protect themselves from evil, the Kitasoo Indians rubbed juniper on their backs for good fortune, and hunters from some parts of the Navajo tribe smoked the plant for good luck before setting out. Juniper also featured in ceremonial rituals of many tribes, including the Heiltzuk, Oweekeno and Gitksan. Haisla Indians made their ceremonial rattles from the lightweight and moderately hard wood, and juniper was burnt as incense during Cheyenne rituals.

Juniper was a source of medicine for many North American Indian tribes, including the Gitksan and Algonkin Indians. Records suggest that it seems to have been a popular remedy among the Hanaksiala, some of the Cree, the Bella Coola, Iroquois, Cheyenne and Tanana tribes, as well as the Alaskan Inuits for treating coughs. The latter and the Blackfoot and Kwakiutl Indians, and some of the Cree, used it to treat lung ailments generally, and records show that the Okanagan-Colville, Tanana, Malecite, Carrier, Micmac and Thompson Indians all chose it for treating tuberculosis. Asthma was eased with juniper by the Chippewa Indians. Alaskan Inuits turned to it as a remedy for influenza, and they and the Hanaksiala, Okanagan-Colville, Iroquois, Thompson, Cheyenne and Tanana tribes dosed colds with it. Some of the Cree tribe, and the Kwakiutl Indians prescribed it for diarrhoea, while the Thompson Indians used it as a purgative. Kidney problems were treated with it by some of the Okanagan-Colville tribe, as well as the Thompson, Iroquois, Hanaksiala and Tanana Indians, and it was a remedy for some urinary ailments for the Potawatomi. Stomach ailments generally were eased with juniper by the Thompson and Bella Coola tribes, and it was turned to as a remedy for indigestion by the Bella Coola. The Thompson tribe used the plant for some heart problems and as an agent for relieving blood pressure, and the Kwakiutl prescribed it to purify the blood. Shuswap Indians used parts of juniper to cause sweating, the Cheyenne and some of the Cree treated fever with it – and the Cheyenne also prescribed it as a sedative. For the Thompson, Micmac and Tanana Indians juniper according to the records also offered a remedy for rheumatism, and it was also used by the Delaware, some of the Cree, and the Cheyenne tribe for various female problems. Juniper provided a treatment for various oral disorders among the Tanana, and Cheyenne Indians, it was used for easing toothache by some of the Cree, and was applied to sore eyes by some of the Okanagan-Colville, and the Thompson Indians. Blackfoot Indians used juniper to treat

venereal diseases, and the Hanaksiala, the Micmac and some of the Cree used it to heal wounds. Apart from the foregoing for the Malecite, Micmac, Okanagan-Colville, Iroquois, Delaware, Hanaksiala and Thompson Indians juniper also offered a tonic. In hotter countries a gum (or varnish) can be tapped from the trees. While in Russia it is said that the bark has been used for tanning. The roots yield a brown dye, and the cones can give a purple one.

Oil extracted from juniper 'berries' has been used in veterinary medicine, particularly on wounds to prevent them being irritated by flies.

The durable wood has provided local fuel and in India it has been burnt as incense. For the Scandinavians the burning branches offer a disinfectant.

An English poet, Edward Thomas (1878-1917) draws juniper into his poem entitled *The Combe*.

.... no one scrambles over the sliding chalk
By beech and yew and perishing juniper
Down the half precipices of its sides,
..... and all the singing birds
Except the missel-thrush that loves juniper,
Are quite shut out.

It is an emblem of the Scottish Murray clan.

Today an oil extract from the cones (from this species or relatives) is used on a commercial scale to flavour gin (1 kg. flavours more than 400 litres of gin) and liqueurs, as well as cola drinks and root beer. Distilled residue can provide animal fodder. Juniper is also used in veterinary medicine. The perfumery and detergent industries use the oil, as does the toiletry industry (in soaps and lotions). For the food industry juniper is used commercially as a flavouring (in ice cream, confectionery, sauerkraut, meat and chewing gum).

Medicinally, according to records, use of the plant can be traced back to at least the Arabian and ancient Greek physicians. One practice that accounts for the name 'bastard killer' was that of swallowing the berry-like cones to cause an abortion. Herbalists used to recommend juniper for the treatment of gum disorders, worms, piles, fluid retention, leprosy and urinary ailments. In India it has also been used to treat some venereal diseases. Today it is used primarily in remedies for the treatment of cystitis and rheumatism, and in homoeopathic treatments.

It is the birthday flower for 3rd October.