

Mandragora officinarum

[Synonyms : *Atropa mandragora*, *Mandragora acaulis*, *Mandragora vernalis*]

MANDRAKE is a perennial. Native to southern Europe, the south-eastern Mediterranean, and to the Himalayas, it has purplish, white, greenish-yellow or blue flowers.

It is also known as *Araune* (German), *Aruna* (Swedish), Apple of the genie, Apples of the fool, *Astrang* (Urdu), Common mandrake, Devil's apples, Devil's candle, Devil's food, Devil's testicles, European mandrake, *Galgenmännchen* (German), *Lakshmana* (Hindi, Sanskrit), Little gallow man, Love apple, Mandragora, *Mandragora lékařská* (Czech), *Mandragóras* (Greek), *Mandragoro oficina* (Esperanto), *Mandragouída* (Greek), Mandrake apple, and Satan's apple; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of horror, and 'I wound to soothe'.

The fetid smelling leaves enlarge as fruit develop in Autumn.

Warning – the leaves and roots are so poisonous that they cannot be used internally or externally. It causes insensitivity to pain, increased heartbeat, dilated pupils, extreme sensitivity to light, excessive perspiration, paralysis of the gastrointestinal tract, heavy sedation, coma and death. The flesh may also be poisonous and cause hallucinations.

The laws of some countries restrict mandrake's use.

Mandrake is not related to the American mandrake (*Podophyllum peltatum*) with which it shares several names.

Officinarum 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.

It was the Arabs who called the fruit Devil's apples and believed that they encouraged sensuousness ie. acted as an aphrodisiac.

The earliest of the known records that refer to mandrake is to be found in the Book of Genesis (Chapter 30) in the Old Testament of the *Bible*. The King James version describes how Rachel agreed that her sister Leah should sleep one night with Jacob in return for some of the mandrake plants collected in the wheat fields by Reuben, Leah's son. Their repute as a fertility drug and aphrodisiac was such that she would do anything to obtain them as she was desperate for a child – and she gave birth to Joseph. Authorities believe that this could have taken place in about 1620 BC. They also believe that mandrake may actually have been cultivated in Egypt from at least the 18th Dynasty (1539-1295 BC). Both the plant and its fruit are depicted in murals found in the tomb of Tut'ankhamun (the boy-king who died in c.1340 BC) and others after him. There are also descriptions of the plant in Assyrian clay tablets dating from about 800 BC.

Another of the plant's qualities familiar thousands of years ago was its anaesthetic attributes. One story suggests that the famous Carthaginian soldier, Hannibal (247-182 BC) could have used this to his advantage. He is said to have feigned retreat from rebellious African troops and left behind large quantities of wine adulterated with an extract of mandrake root. The advancing soldiers stupefied themselves on this booty which allowed Hannibal upon his return to overpower them unopposed.

The Greeks and the Romans both used this plant as an anaesthetic. The Greeks associated mandrake with Aphrodite, the goddess of love. It was often given as 'death wine' to

crucified criminals who then became comatose with a weak heart beat that made them appear to be dead. Usually, at this point, the family would receive the 'body' for burial and would often save the victim's life. Some have suggested that it was this 'wine' that was offered to Jesus Christ on the Cross. Records of its use as an anaesthetic continue through the centuries. Among these authorities mention those referred to by the celebrated Arabian philosopher and physician, Avicenna (980-1037).

During the time of the Greek Empire the plant collectors attempted to protect their sources by discouraging others from gathering it. This was achieved by spreading alarming, fictitious stories of the plant's capabilities ie. that if a man pulled the plant out of the ground he could be killed from hearing the shrieks of the demon who dwelt in it. To circumvent such a fate it seems that the plant could be tied to a dog who when whipped would pull it out and of course end up dead instead of its master. Witnesses to this desperate attempt would be required to have their ears stopped with wax to prevent them from hearing the lethal screams. Later yet others have contended that the screams were not lethal but that if their tone was interpreted correctly it was possible with experience to recognize a mandrake or a womandrake and that naturally this would have a bearing on its medicinal use and advantages.

These superstitions, together with the medicinal, narcotic and aphrodisiacal applications continued into the Middle Ages. By then people believed that the mandrake grew naturally under the gallows where it received seed from the blood (or other remains) of murderers. The Arabs recorded a complicated method for preparing the mandrake root as a poison (the antidote for which embraced every conceivable spice, ointment, medicine or other preparation known at the time) – one that according to legend was used by Lucrezia Borgia (1480-1519) the eventual Duchess of Ferrara, in her alleged exploits. It is with little surprise that one learns that the fashionable Doctrine of Signatures espoused by many at this time enabled some to believe that the alleged human shape of the roots (invariably nefariously assisted by man) indicated their ability to cure all manner of human ills. The roots carved with human features commanded high prices as charms with miraculous powers that varied in kind and intensity according to the regional beliefs. For instance in England around the Cambridge area village inns once held bawdy 'Venus nights'. Mandrake roots (or more often those of the native white bryony, *Bryonia dioica*) in the shape of the female form were entered in competition to find the most striking female likeness. The winner, usually chosen by the landlord's wife, was believed to have exceptional magical qualities and was hung up until replaced after another night of revelry and competition. The remaining roots were believed to have sufficiently potent magical qualities that justified hanging them in the pigsty to encourage the sows to give large litters. Then when the root had dried and shrivelled it was put in the household purse or money-stocking where its residual forces could be harnessed to improve finances. In France they were thought to be able to bring riches (provided that they were kept secret as otherwise an accusation of witchcraft might be levelled). It was considered to be the most valuable of all of a witch's impedimenta as mandrake was capable of making every spell work. When Joan of Arc (c.1412-1431) faced trial in 1431 on charges of heresy and sorcery, the latter included the accusation of possession of mandrake. Two centuries later there were many executions throughout Germany for mandrake worship. Although generally there mandrake was viewed as an all-purpose good luck charm in the early 17th Century the roots were also the subject of an unusual (and perhaps disturbing) cult. Resembling the human form it would be wrapped in silk cloth and bathed in water each Friday as if it was human. The 'bath' water was then used as a treatment for some ills and also to ease childbirth pains. Even today there are still some parts of Africa and the East where the mandrake continues to hold some superstitious sway.

Perhaps it should be mentioned that doubts about these tales were beginning to emerge in Europe by at least the 16th Century. The man who has come to be called the ‘father of British botany’, William Turner (c.1510-1568) is understood in about 1526 to have disagreed that the roots all assumed a human shape, and such views were openly supported by the English herbalist and barber-surgeon, John Gerard (1545-1612) at the end of that Century in a robustly written rejection of the many elaborate stories.

It seems however that the famous English dramatist, William Shakespeare (1564-1616), was happy to rely on his audiences’ superstitions in both *Romeo and Juliet*

.....what with loathsome smells,
And shrieks like mandrakes’ torn out of the earth,
That living mortals, hearing them, run mad;

and Part 2 of *Henry VI*

Would curses kill, as doth the mandrake’s groan,

although references to the mandrake in several of the other plays are more circumspect.

Mandrake roots (usually in wine) were used in anaesthesia in early western surgical medicine and for easing the pain of childbirth – and many European countries recognized the plant medicinally until the 19th Century. It was chemically analysed in 1889 and shown to contain hyoscine that can deaden pain. Homoeopathic medicine first introduced it as an ingredient in a preparation in 1877. The leaves were used for healing wounds, ulcers and inflammation, and the root (apart from providing an ingredient for love potions) was also used in the treatment of gout and insomnia. Today the leaves and roots are rarely harvested and used for medicinal purposes except in homoeopathic remedies – for no other reason than the fact that they are so poisonous that it is normally unsuitable for internal or external use in any form.

Despite the foregoing it should be said that the fruit are still considered edible by some today (especially in the Mediterranean), and that they are even sought after as a delicacy and aphrodisiac.