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Melissa officinalis

[Synonyms : *Melissa bicornis*]

LEMON BALM is a perennial. Native to central and southern Europe, to the Mediterranean and the near East, it has small sweet-scented, creamy-white (occasionally pinkish or yellow) flowers.

It is also known as Balm, Balm gentle, Balm leaf, Balm mint, *Baranjiboya* (Urdu), Baulme, Bawm, Bee balm, Bee-herb, Bee's plant, *Bililotan* (Hindi), Blue balm, *Cedronella* (Italian), *Citronelle* (French), *Citronmeliso* (Esperanto), *Citronmeliss* (Swedish), Common balm, Cure-all, Dropsy plant, Dropsywort, European balm, *Frauenkraut* (German), Garden balm, *Gartenmelisse* (German), *Gwenynddail* (Welsh), *Hjärtansfröjd* (Swedish), Honey flower, Honey plant, *Honungsblomma* (Swedish), *Lemonika* (Czech), Lemon mint, Lemon nettle, *Marulka* (Czech), *Matečník* (Czech), *Meduňka lékařská* (Czech), *Melisa* (Czech), Melissa (English, Italian, Maltese), *Méliste* (French, German), *Melissört* (Swedish), *Modergräs* (Swedish), *Mutterkraut* (German), *Piment* (Channel Islander-Guernsey and Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), Pimentary, *Planá máta* (Czech), *Sitruunamelissa* (Finnish), Sweet balm, Sweet Mary, Tea balm, *Toronjil* (Spanish), *Včelanka* (Czech), *Včelník* (Czech), and *Zitronenmelisse* (German); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of pleasantry, and sympathy.

The leaves will turn yellow in dry soil and full sunshine and their strong lemon scent will become harsh. At its most the scent and taste is not as strong as that of lemon verbena (*Aloysia triphylla*).

An essential oil is obtained by distillation.

Warning – the plant in prolonged contact can cause dermatitis or allergies. Commercially available spirit extractions need to be used with caution as they contain 75% alcohol.

Lemon balm is a member of a different family to that of lemon verbena (*Aloysia triphylla*).

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.

Balm is a corruption of the word 'balsam' and for some authorities infers a comparison of lemon balm's scent with that of a major sweet-smelling oil and for others seems to associate it with a resinous substance often obtainable from other plants referred to as 'balm'.

The ancient Greeks who dedicated lemon balm to the temple of Diana grew the herb as a bee plant.

In the 1st Century the noted Greek physician, Dioscorides, recorded its use particularly in healing wounds (including snake bites) as also did Pliny the Elder (23-79), the celebrated Roman natural historian. However it was not until about the 10th Century that its medicinal qualities began to be more widely appreciated in Europe. The Continent learnt of its value in the treatment of anxiety or depression (apart from anything else) from the Arabs. Avicenna (980-1037), the Arabian philosopher and physician, is said to have recommended lemon balm 'to make the heart merry'.

In the 13th Century lemon balm gained a slightly different reputation in England. It was reputed to have been a significant factor in the long life of one, Llewelyn, Prince of Glamorgan

(108 years), and also that of a Mr. John Hussey of Kent who was said to have lived to see his 116th birthday and was believed to have attributed this longevity to his habit of taking lemon balm tea with honey at breakfast each day. The famed German alchemist, physician and philosopher, Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim (1493-1501) who adopted the name Paracelsus meaning 'beyond Celsus' (who was a Roman physician who lived in the 1st Century), was convinced that lemon balm could revitalize a man.

In the 17th Century lemon balm was one of the ingredients in the sought-after Carmelite Water made by European nuns to aid the complexion. Today the oil is used by the perfumery industry – and as an ingredient in furniture polish.

Young leaves have been added to salads, and in the Netherlands and Belgium they are also said to have been a popular flavouring for pickled eels or herrings. Today they are used widely for flavouring omelettes and salads, and lemon balm is also a distinctive flavouring adopted by the Swiss for some of their cheeses. It is also an important ingredient in Benedictine, Chartreuse, and other liqueurs

Apiarists have known for centuries that the plant is attractive to bees. Apparently the Greeks put sprigs of it in beehives in order to attract swarms in the area. And 16th Century records show that this was one of the plants that was rubbed over a hive to encourage the bees to make their honey.

One other past use that could be applied today was the addition of the leaf and stem juice to furniture polish to give it a lemon scent.

The plant came to be known to some North American Indian tribes who absorbed it into their medicinal repertoire. It was valued by the Costanoans for easing babies' wind or stomach upsets, and the Cherokee Indians used it for treating fever generally, typhoid fever and colds (and they also prescribed it as a stimulant).

Today as much as in past centuries its ability to dispel 'the blues' and balance depression is still accepted in some quarters. Lemon balm was an important ingredient in medieval cordials, and Italian monasteries, particularly were known to use it as an ingredient in some liqueurs. In France now Melissa tea or *Thé de France* (an infusion of the lemon-scented leaves) is a traditional 'pick-me up' for headaches and tiredness. Lemon balm can also add an enjoyable fragrance for other teas, particularly China tea.

Medicinally, herbalists used the plant to treat depression, various stomach disorders, period problems, wounds and snake bites, and also as a digestive aid. Lemon balm can still be recommended today in the treatment of mumps, some viruses, various psychiatric disorders, eczema, insect bites and wounds. It can also be proposed for easing colds, flu, fever and headaches – and can be an ingredient in proprietary medicines.