

Mentha

Labiatae

[*Lamiaceae*]

Mentha honours the nymph Minthe in Greek mythology. She came from the Cocytus (the river of lamentation) and was pursued by Hades. This was one of his unacceptable infidelities for Persephone his wife and either she or Demeter (his mother-in-law) ground Minthe underfoot. Hades then transformed the nymph into mint and this was then dedicated to him.

The classical Greek name is *minthe* and the Latin *menta* or *mentha*. Generally today these plants are known as *Mentas* (Spanish), *Menta* (Italian), *Mente* (Guernsey), *Menthe* (French), Mint, *Minze* (German), *Munt* (Dutch) and *Pudina* (Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Marathi, Punjabi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu); and in flower language are said to be a symbol of purity, and virtue.

Warning – mint should be avoided if suffering from anxiety disorders. The oils in mints can cause serious skin disorders including inflammation and blistering, and they can also cause damage to the central nervous system, as well as cramps, and can increase urine production.

The *Bible* tells how with aniseed (*Pimpinella anisum*) and cumin (*Cuminum cyminum*) mint was collected as a tithe by the Pharisees. And another Hebrew custom of the same period was to use the aromatic plant as a strewing herb on synagogue floors. In the eastern Mediterranean the old civilizations believed that mint would not only prevent milk coagulating but also its acid fermentation – quite important considerations in the Middle Eastern heat. Mint was added to bathwater as a restorative and in Athens where every part of the body was scented with a different perfume in ancient Greek times mint was reserved for the arms.

In southern Europe the culinary use of mint may go back to Neolithic times (2700-1900 BC). It seems however that the mint used 2000 years ago by the Romans was water mint (*Mentha aquatica*) but by the 6th Century many varieties had been introduced to Europe. Cultivation of mints by the monasteries in Europe was to be encouraged further in the 8th and 9th Centuries by Charlemagne (747-814) and today there are over 600 varieties.

In the Middle Ages the Italian churches copied the by then centuries-old practice of using mint as a strewing herb. In the 14th Century however it was used particularly to whiten the teeth. In the East in Japan its restorative aroma was so highly prized that pomanders used to be worn filled with the leaves.

According to John Gerard (1545-1612), the English barber-surgeon and herbalist (the latter as a charlatan for many authorities) an injured man was ill advised to take mint as his wounds would not heal. Despite this however mint had many medicinal uses and has been one of the ingredients in the herbalists' repertoire for centuries. They have recommended it in the past for improving both memory and appetite, to ease childbirth (although wet nurses were often forbidden to eat it for fear this would flavour their milk), as an ingredient in cures for hiccups and sleeplessness, as a remedy to treat bites from rabid dogs, and for sores and ulcers and also as a treatment for flatulence.

Today its uses range through the medicinal, culinary and general domestic spheres and it seems to be especially popular with the Arabs and the English as a flavouring. Mint oils are

used to flavour the liqueur *Crème de Menthe*. Mints are commercially cultivated in the United States particularly to meet the increasing demand for peppermint and spearmint as a flavouring in toothpaste and chewing gum. (As early as the 6th Century mint leaves had been used for cleaning teeth.)