

Mentha pulegium

[Synonyms : *Mentha daghestanica*, *Mentha vulgare*, *Pulegium daghestanicum*, *Pulegium vulgare*]

PENNYROYAL is a perennial. Native to western Asia, to North Africa and Europe (including Britain), it has tiny mauvish-blue to lilac flowers.

It is also known as *Brymllys* (Welsh), Churchwort, Creeping pennyroyal, English pennyroyal, European pennyroyal, *Flohkraut* (German), Haggis grass, *La menthe pouliot* (French), Lily-royal, Lurkey-dish, Lurk-in-the-ditch, *Menta romana* (Italian), Orgal, Organ, Organy, Pilole-rial, *Plejju* (Maltese), *Podina* (Urdu), *Poejo* (Portuguese), *Polei* (Dutch and German), *Poleiminze* (German), *Polejmynta* (Swedish), *Poleo* (Spanish), *Pouillot* (French), *Pouliet* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), Pudding grass, Pudding herb, *Puleggio* (Italian), *Pulegium*, *Puolanminttu* (Finnish), Run-by-the-ground, True pennyroyal, and Whirl mint; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of ‘flee away’, fleeing, and ‘you had better go’.

Warning – apart from the general warnings for mint handling pennyroyal can cause dermatitis. It should not be taken internally during pregnancy, when pregnancy is suspected or when suffering from kidney disorders. Taken internally it can cause convulsions, coma and death. Half a teaspoonful of pure oil can cause muscle spasm, delirium, shock and loss of consciousness, and two tablespoonfuls can cause death.) In the United States pennyroyal in any form has to be declared ‘for external use only’.

Pennyroyal is considered to be an endangered species in the wild in Britain and is protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. It is also a protected species in Northern Ireland under the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, and in the Republic of Ireland under the Flora Protection Order 1987.

Pennyroyal’s thyme-reminiscent scent and unmint-like appearance originally led observers to believe that the plant was a member of the *Thymus* family. American pennyroyal is a member of a different genus (*Hedeoma*) in the same family.

Pulegium is derived from Latin *pulicis* (flea) with reference to the plant’s flea repellent properties (when used both in the fresh form and as smoke from the burning leaves) and is a Latin name for this species.

The old French name for this species was *puliol royale* (an extension of the earlier French name for Thyme *puliol*) from which the distortion ‘Pennyroyal’ in English is said to have emerged. The modern French name *La menthe pouliot* still reflects the name’s earlier roots. The word ‘pudding’ in some of the common names means a ‘meat stuffing’ for which pennyroyal was often used as a flavouring.

In northern Britain on both sides of the Scottish border pennyroyal was a regular ingredient in many of the traditional puddings such as haggis and black pudding.

Its normally prostrate behaviour enables the plant to be laid as a lawn or grown in hanging baskets. (Such a lawn need only be mown twice a year.)

Pennyroyal beyond any other was prized for hundreds of centuries for both medicinal uses and roles in various ancient ceremonies throughout Europe. It was known to the ancient Greeks and the Romans who both used it quite extensively for medicinal purposes. (Pennyroyal may also have been an ingredient in the drink taken by initiates to the Greek

Eleusinian Mysteries.) And later Anglo-Saxon and Welsh records indicate that the plant was respected similarly in some countries in northern Europe. This regard was no less in Britain by the time the Pilgrim Fathers set sail for North America in their crowded Mayflower in the Autumn of 1620 as witnessed by the fact that among their provisions they made room for pennyroyal plants for their new home.

With regard to superstition pennyroyal has had its share. It is said that until relatively recently in England it formed part of a witch's garland – as well as, many contended, being able to offer protection from the evil eye.

Some North African countries still offer mint tea to their guests as a sign of hospitality – and in the eastern Mediterranean the plant is used to obtain a dye.

In days gone by European sailors (especially when on long sea voyages) used to take pots of growing pennyroyal for fresh use to purify or clear casks of stale drinking water.

Medicinally, pennyroyal was recommended by herbalists for the treatment of stings, snake bites, carbuncles, blotches on the face, skin ulcers, bruises and toothache. It is also understood that until quite recently the plant was used to instigate abortion or expel a stillborn baby. It was prescribed for headaches, dizziness and nervous disorders, and also for faintness. Today it can be used to treat period problems, colds, wind, indigestion, fever, skin eruptions, gout and itching. A vinegar made from the leaves can be applied to bruises and burns. It is also used in homoeopathy.