

Myrtus communis

[Synonyms : *Myrtus boetica*, *Myrtus italica*, *Myrtus latifolia*, *Myrtus oerstediana*, *Myrtus romana*, *Myrtus sparsifolia*]

MYRTLE is an evergreen shrub or tree. Probably native to western Asia and the Mediterranean it has small sweetly fragrant, creamy white (sometimes rose) flowers with many long golden stamens.

It is also known as *Brautmyrte* (German), Classic myrtle, Common myrtle, Common myrtle of Southern Europe, *Echte Myrte* (German), *Habul ass* (Urdu), *Kulinaval* (Tamil), *Mirto* (Italian, Spanish), *Mirto ordinara* (Esperanto), *Myrta obecná* (Czech, Slovak), *Myrta obyčajná* (Slovak), *Myrte* (French), *Myrten* (Swedish), *Myrtiá* (Greek), *Myrtti* (Finnish), *Rihan* (Maltese), *Smirtiá* (Greek), *Sutrsowa* (Bengali), Tarentum myrtle, True myrtle, *Vilayati mehndi* (Hindi, Punjabi), and *Yās* (Arabic); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of amiability, love, 'love in absence and victory', maidenhood, and pleasure.

Distillation of the leaves and flowers gives Angel water (*Eau d'anges*) and yellow, aromatic essential oil. Oil can be extracted from the berries too.

Communis means 'common, general or growing with'.

The leaves were used by the ancient Egyptians (the women dressed their hair with them for feasts and dancing) and the Jews also used them during their festivals.

Much reference is made to the shrub by the ancient poets in the Old Testament of the *Bible*, as well as in ancient Greek and Roman records.

In Greek and Roman mythology there appears to be a consistent thread relating myrtle to Aphrodite in the former and her counterpart Venus in the latter. The Greeks planted myrtle around temples dedicated to Aphrodite, and when colonizing a new country Greek immigrants would bear myrtle (hopefully favoured by Aphrodite as ruler of the sea) to indicate the closing of one era and the opening of another. The mythology describes how Aphrodite wore a crown of myrtle on her head when she received the golden apple from Paris as acknowledgement of her supreme beauty. In Roman mythology Venus was said to have been interrupted by satyrs when bathing and to have hidden behind a myrtle tree. Then when she emerged out of the waves she wore myrtle on her head. Another Greek legend connected with myrtle offers an explanation for the minute punctures in the leaves. Phaedra, the young wife of Theseus and stepmother of Hippolytus, falls in love with her stepson. While waiting for Hippolytus to finish exercising his horse she sits under a myrtle tree and with a hairpin wiles away the time by piercing its leaves.

Some authorities point out that for the ancient Greeks myrtle was a symbol of peace, love and happiness in marriage. Triumphant competitors in the Olympic Games were crowned with myrtle wreaths and heroes returning from war, as well as Greek magistrates, also bore them. Even in modern Greece it can still be woven into wreaths and strewn in the path of royalty.

For the Romans myrtle was dedicated to Venus, their goddess of love and sexuality, and the high priest and initiates of the secret cult centred on the Eleusinian mysteries (which was adopted from the Greeks) were all crowned with myrtle wreaths. During this period in Roman mysticism myrtle represented love and constancy, but this was to degenerate to unchaste desire when the plant was later dedicated to Mars as god of war. Roman

celebrations generally included myrtle as a prominent decoration and sprigs of it were often woven into bridal wreaths. The Romans honoured their playwrights and poets with myrtle garlands too. In the kitchen the ancient Romans used myrtle to flavour stews, and added it to some wines as well. The latter were believed to be more potent because of this and were held to have acquired aphrodisiacal qualities with its inclusion as an ingredient. (The Romans also made a fruit sauce with the berries that was eaten with wild boar.)

For Moslems a legend declares that when Adam was expelled from the Garden of Eden he carried wheat (*Triticum*) as the chief of all kinds of food, dates (*Phoenix dactylifera*) as the chief of fruits, and myrtle as chief of all sweet-scented flowers.

As already indicated myrtle was often considered to be an aphrodisiac and in Israeli weddings today it is carried by the bride. At the Jewish Feast of the Tabernacle myrtle is also chosen to decorate booths.

Myrtle is a symbol of the conversion of the purity of the Virgin Mary and of her influence over the waywardness of the human soul for Christians. Still in some Mediterranean countries today it is strewn on church floors during Easter celebrations.

In Britain myrtle had its own superstitions and customs. Some of these were as love oracles. For instance if a leaf crackled in the hand it meant that one's lover was faithful. At country weddings, in addition to orange blossom (*Citrus aurantium*) and rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*), the bride would carry a sprig of myrtle as an emblem of fertility (that would seem to be reminiscent of alleged aphrodisiacal claims). After the service one of the bridesmaids would then plant the myrtle sprig in the bride's garden. (It is reported that Queen Victoria carried sprays in her wedding bouquet when she married Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Goth in 1840, and cuttings from the sprigs of this bouquet were used to grow new bushes. Apparently it was from these 'new' bushes that sprigs were included in the more recent wedding bouquet of the Princess of Wales in 1981.) In Somerset myrtle planted in a window box by a good woman was believed to be extremely lucky, and in Wales a bush either side of the door would keep peace and love inside (it would be tempting fate to remove them).

Tannin in the bark and roots is used in Russia and Turkey to treat the finest leathers. There also the berries are sometimes steeped in brandy or fermented to make an alcoholic drink, and the sweet-tasting flowers can be added to salads.

In Cyprus the leaves are added to bathwater to scent and soften it.

A distillation from the flowers was once taken as an aphrodisiac, and in Portugal it was the main ingredient in Angel water.

Records are unclear as to when myrtle was first introduced to Britain. Many authorities suspect that it came to the Country with the Roman conquerors – but it is known that centuries later in 1562 William Cecil (1520-1598), who was then Chief Secretary of State and destined to become 1st Baron Burghley or Burchleigh in 1571 and Lord High Treasurer the following year, successfully sought out the tree through a contact in Paris.

Myrtle is well represented in English literature. Michael Drayton (1563-1631) wrote in his last work *The Muses' Elysium*,

The lover with the myrtle sprays
Adorns his crisped cresses.

It also appears several times in the plays and poems of his famous contemporary, William Shakespeare (1564-1616). In *Measure for Measure* when Isabella is both berating Angelo and pleading for Claudio's life she cries

.....nothing but thunder, -
Merciful Heaven!
Thou rather with thy sharp and sulphurous bolt
Splitt'st the unwedgeable and gnarled oak

Than the soft myrtle;
while in one of his poems, *The Passionate Pilgrim* he writes
Venus, with young Adonis sitting by her,
Under a myrtle shade, began to woo him:

Born in the same year his peer, Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) mentions myrtle in a poem entitled *The Passionate Shepherd to His Love*.

..... a thousand fragrant posies,
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle
Embroider'd all with leaves of myrtle.

Then John Milton (1608-1674) refers to myrtle in *Paradise Lost*.

.....The rooffe
Of thickest covert was inwoven shade,
Laurel and myrtle, and what higher grew
Of firm and fragrant leaf.

Today Angel water is used by the cosmetics, perfumery and toiletry industries. Essential oil is used to manufacture a liqueur known as *nerito*, while the reddish-grey wood is used to make furniture, tool handles and walking sticks, and provides a source of charcoal.

Medicinally, the green and dried fruits have been used to treat stomach upsets, and today an infusion of the leaves can be used in the treatment of urinary infections and piles. Recent research has identified antibiotic properties.