

*Ocimum basilicum*

[Synonyms : *Ocimum americanum*, *Ocimum bullatum*, *Ocimum citriodorum*, *Ocimum lanceolatum*, *Ocimum simile*]

**BASIL** is a perennial (grown as an annual in temperate areas). Native to southern Asia, India, Iran and the Middle East, it has small scented, white or purplish flowers.

It is also known as *Albahaca menor* (Spanish), Annual weed, *Baburi* (Punjabi), *Baburi tulsi* (Bengali, Hindi), Balm, *Basilic* (Creole, French), *Basilic de France* (French), *Basilico* (Italian), *Basilienkraut* (German), *Basilicum* (Dutch), *Basilika* (Finnish, Swedish), *Basilikum* (German), *Basilique sauvage* (French), *Bassilico* (Italian), *Bazalka pravá* (Czech), *Bazielkruid* (Dutch), *Bazilio* (Esperanto), *Bhutulasi* (Telugu), *Bubai tulsi* (Hindi), Common basil, *Dhal tulasi* (Oriya), Duppy basil, *Fon bazin* (West Indian), Greek royal, *Húng quế* (Vietnamese), *Kama kasturi* (Kannada), *Karpura tulsi* (Tamil), Kiss-me-Nicholas, *Kleine Bergmünze* (German), *Königskraut* (German), *Maduru-tala* (Sinhalese), *Manglak luk* (Thai), Mosquito bush, *Munjariki* (Sanskrit), *Niazbo* (Kashmiri), *Raihān* (Arabic), *Ruku-suku* (Malay), *Sabza* (Gujarati, Marathi), St. Josephwort, *Selaseh* (Malay), *Selasih* (Javanese), *Solasih* (Sundanese), *Suwanda-tala* (Sinhalese), Sweet basil, *Tirniru-pachai* (Tamil), *Tirunitnu* (Malayalam), and *Volmynte* (Dutch); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of good wishes, hatred, hatred for the opposite sex, and poverty.

A golden yellow essence or oil with a delicate aroma is obtained by distillation from the roots and leaves. This oil is known as Basil oil, basilique, *Manglak-luk* (Thai), *Suwanda-tala* (Sinhalese), or *Selaseh* (Malay).

Warning – prolonged handling of the plant can cause dermatitis.

There are now several forms of basil that vary both in appearance eg. a garden lettuce leaf variety, and flavour eg. one has a peppermint-like taste.

*Basilicum* is derived from Greek *basileo-* (king) meaning ‘royal or princely’ with reference for some authorities to the classical practice that required the plant to be harvested only by the supreme ruler and for others to reputed healing properties.

Basil was familiar to the ancient Egyptians who not only used it for embalming but also mixed it with myrrh (*Commiphora myrrha*) as an offering to the gods in petition or appeasement. For the ancient Greeks basil was a popular seasoning. Although it was also in time a Greek symbol of mourning. They associated it with hatred and venomous anger as well and believed its healthy growth could only be assured if its sowing was accompanied by abuse and bad temper. The ancient Greeks also depicted poverty as a woman with basil at her side. This attitude towards the plant was equally prevalent in the Roman Empire. While for relatively recent Italians it became a token of love and even today in some parts of Italy a man can still indicate his serious intentions as a suitor by wearing a sprig of basil in his hair.

In 1533 when still Duke of Orléans (1519-1559), the future Henri II of France, married the 14 year old Italian, Catherine de Médicis and through his bride France was first introduced to basil. She brought Italian chefs with her (as well as the Italian seasoning practices) and the French Court christened it *Herbe Royale*. Today in the West basil is

still associated with Italy especially and is a significant ingredient in the widely-enjoyed Italian sauce *pesto*.

In some European countries basil was once respected as a sacred herb that could not be picked by a woman and had to be ritually harvested by a priest. He was not allowed to have come within range of any woman experiencing her period, he had to wear new apparel and he could not have any metal on his person. Then before gathering the plant he had to have purified his right hand in water from three separate springs. Today basil features in some Christian ceremonies of the Greek Orthodox Church.

Basil has long been revered in Indian Hindu homes. However authorities note that although this respect is normally reserved for the species often referred to as holy basil (*Ocimum sanctum*) it has had the effect of curtailing the use of basil generally as a food flavouring among some Indian Hindus. Many Indians also believe that its growth in the vicinity of temples and homes will ensure happiness. In Iran, Malaysia, and Egypt basil is widely associated with mourning and the plant is grown or scattered on graves. In Haiti the plant belongs to the pagan goddess of love.

For many rural Mexicans basil has powers relating to money and love. A wife is supposed to be able to regain a faithful and loving husband who has a wandering eye by performing a ritual dusting of basil powder over certain parts of her upper body.

Basil was hung in Caribbean homes to repel mosquitoes. It has also been used there to cleanse poisoned wounds and in the form of an infusion it has been taken to alleviate colds and liver ailments.

In the Mediterranean region the plant has been cultivated for about 2000 years but it was only introduced to western Europe (including Britain) in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Initially here it seems it was mainly scattered as a strewing herb but gradually, when it was dried and powdered, it came to be an ingredient in snuff.

It seems that after initial enthusiasm among English cooks basil lost much favour in their kitchens apart from serving as a flavouring in turtle soup. However farmers' wives in Elizabethan England did give small pots of basil to guests as a sign of friendship. One local superstition connected with basil was that if it died immediately on the wearer this meant that he or she was 'light of love'.

Old Mediterranean beliefs contended that a sprig of basil left under a pot would be transformed in due time into a scorpion and this nightmare at one stage held such sway that it was believed that sniffing the plant would send a scorpion into the brain. But in the Mediterranean today it can be found growing outside houses in large pots (or in small pots on pavement tables of French restaurants) as a fly repellent. While in Africa basil has been included in cosmetics for both its insect repellent qualities and its fragrance.

On the Indonesian island of Sumatra basil has been cultivated for ritual offerings to the spirits. Today basil oil provides a commercial food flavouring (and is the main ingredient in the basil paste known as *pesto*). It also offers an alternative to mignonette (*Reseda odorata*) in perfumery and is an ingredient in soaps, toothpastes and mouthwashes. This oil is also perhaps surprisingly a basic ingredient of Chartreuse-type liqueurs.

Basil is used now both medicinally and in cooking. Fresh basil leaves are a source of beta-carotene, calcium and Vitamins A and C particularly. It is understood that the American Cancer Society believes that a diet consisting of a high content of plants that contain beta-carotene can help to reduce the risk of contracting some forms of cancer. It is interesting to note that 1 oz. of fresh basil leaves provides 24% of a man's and 30% of a woman's daily requirement of Vitamin A (equivalent to 1¾ oz. carrots) and 11% of an adult's daily requirement of calcium. Another quality is highlighted in relatively recent clinical trials in India where it has been shown that basil can help in the treatment of acne. In India also the seeds are used as a remedy for dysentery and chronic diarrhoea.

It is the birthday flower for 12<sup>th</sup> July.