

*Ocimum sanctum*

[Synonyms : *Ocimum tenuiflorum*]

**HOLY BASIL** is a perennial. Native to tropical Asia it has tiny white or purple flowers. It is also known as *Basilic (petite feuille)* (French), Bush tea, *Heiliger Basilikum* (German), *Kemangen* (Javanese), *Klampes* (Sundanese), *Maduru-tala* (Singhalese), *Manjari* (Sanskrit), Mosquito plant, Sacred basil, *Selaseh* (Malay), *Thulasi* (Tamil, Telugu), *Trittavu* (Malayalam), *Tulshi* (Marathi), *Tulsi* (Bengali, German, Gujarati, Hindi, Sanskrit, Tamil), *Tulsi of India*, and *Vishnu tulsi* (Kannada).

*Sanctum* is Latin (to consecrate, hallow, make sacred) meaning ‘holy’.

Holy basil is one of the most sacred plants for the Hindus in India and has been revered for centuries. It is sacred to the Hindu gods Krishna and Vishnu and in the home is looked upon as the family’s protecting spirit. (A legend is said to tell how Vishnu’s wife, Lakshmi, assumed the form of holy basil so that she could soothe the world.) Holy basil can be found growing near most Hindu homes usually on pedestals in the courtyard. The addition of a few leaves to a Hindu dish not only adds flavour but also consecrates it at the same time – although it is understood that many Hindus avoid using any form of basil in cooking, not just this species. During funerals basil is still placed on the breast of the body of the Hindu who has died.

Like basil (*Ocimum basilicum*), holy basil has also been cultivated on the Indonesian island of Sumatra for ritual offerings to the spirits.

This species can be added (sparingly) to salads and used as a condiment. In Asia it is often chewed as an alternative to betel (*Piper betle*).

Old thick stems are used to make beads.

Medicinally, a decoction of the plant has been prescribed in Asian countries for treating coughs, bronchitis, children’s gastric disorders and various skin diseases.