

Origanum majorana

[Synonyms : *Majorana hortensis*]

MARJORAM (English, German) is a perennial (usually grown as an annual or biennial). Native to southern Europe it has tiny white, pink or red flowers.

It is also known as *Amaraco* (Italian), *Amarcus* (French), Annual marjoram, Joy of the mountain, Knotted marjoram, *Maggiorana* (Italian), *Magorana* (Italian), *Majoran* (German), *Majorana* (Spanish), *Marjolaine* (French), *Marjolaine à coquille* (French), *Marjolein* (Dutch), *Maru* (Sanskrit), *Maruga* (Kannada), *Maruvamu* (Malayalam), *Maruvu* (Tamil), *Marva khusha* (Urdu), *Marwa* (Hindi, Punjabi), *Marzanjosh* (Urdu), *Maustemeirami* (Finnish), *Mejram* (Swedish), *Mercankosk* (Turkish), *Murru* (Bengali), *Murwo* (Sindhi), *Rigani* (Greek), *Sansuco* (Persian), Pot marjoram, Sweet marjoram, and *Wurstkraut* (German); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of blushes.

Warning – oil of marjoram used in large quantities can affect the central nervous system.

Majorana is derived from its Greek name *amarakus* and is an old name for this species.

Early communities on Crete (prior to 1600 BC) were familiar with marjoram. According to the Greek physician, Galen (c.130-c.201) their distinguished leaders wore sprigs of marjoram as a symbol of honour.

For the ancient Greeks who used it as a seasoning marjoram was a favourite. They believed Aphrodite, the goddess of love, first cultivated it and that her gentle touch had given marjoram its fragrance. Newly weds were crowned with wreaths of the sweet scented plant. In the form of a pomade the Greeks also covered their hair and eyebrows with its fragrance. In contrast they planted it on graves too as it was not only believed that marjoram's healthy growth was a good sign for the future lives of the deceased but also that it would bring them peace.

The Romans appreciated marjoram no less. They placed wreaths of the plant on the heads of wedding couples to ensure a happy marriage.

One of the greatest of classic poets Virgil (70-19 BC) turns to marjoram to portray tranquility in *The Aeneid* when he writes

.....
Venus showered a dew of peaceful sleep on the limbs of
Ascanius, snuggled him in her breast, and divinely bore him
Up to Idalian groves, where the tender marjoram puts him
To bed in a cradle of flowers and shade and entrancing fragrance.
.....

It used to be believed that marjoram was able (partly because of its aroma) to protect against all manner of illnesses and misfortunes.

In the Middle Ages it was introduced into the rest of Europe and has been cultivated in England since the 14th Century. Apart from becoming a popular strewing plant there marjoram was also believed to be used by witches for purification when they washed. It was an English custom to place a bunch of sweet marjoram beside milk containers during thundery weather as it was thought that this would prevent the milk going sour. At this time the plant tended to be used as a sweet flavouring for cakes, porridge and puddings. Only later was it associated with savoury dishes and added to salads. Today this species

is used particularly as a meat flavouring (a fact emphasized by one of the German names *Wurstkraut* meaning 'sausage herb').

Marjoram yields an unstable purple dye for wool and a reddish-brown linen dye.

The essential oil is used today by the perfumery, toiletry and cosmetics industries for making perfumes and to scent soaps, lotions and creams, and by the drinks industry in alcoholic herbal drinks. It also provides a flavouring for the food industry eg. in sausages. Scented sachets and pot pourri often include the dried marjoram tops in their ingredients.

Medicinally, it was once used as an ingredient in sneezing powders used to cure headaches and clear the head. It has also been used for some period problems.

Marjoram is the birthday flower for 1st June.