

Petroselinum crispum

[Synonyms : *Apium crispum*, *Apium petroselinum*, *Carum petroselinum*, *Petroselinum hortense*, *Petroselinum crispum* subsp. *tuberosum*, *Petroselinum hortense*, *Petroselinum hortense* var. *crispum*, *Petroselinum petroselinum*, *Petroselinum sativum*, *Petroselinum tuberosum*, *Petroselinum vulgare*, *Selinum petroselinum*]

GARDEN PARSLEY is a biennial or perennial (usually grown as an annual). Native to Europe and western Asia it has tiny creamy white or greenish yellow flowers.

It is also known as *Ache*, *Achu mooda* (Kannada), *Ajmood* (Hindi), *Bladpersilja* (Swedish), *Blattpetersilie* (German), Common parsley, Curled parsley, Curly parsley, Devil-and-back-ten-times, *Gartenpetersilie* (German), Herb-of-the-dead, Herb of Venus, Herb Venus, *Kotham-belari* (Malayalam), *Ma'danius* (Arabic), Parsley, *Patraseli* (Javanese), *Perejil* (Spanish), *Pèrsi* (Channel Islander-Guernsey and Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Persil* (French), *Persil des jardins* (French), *Persilja* (Finnish, Swedish), *Persli* (Welsh), *Peterselie* (Dutch), *Petersilie* (German), Petersylunge, *Petroselino kultiva* (Esperanto), *Petruška* (Czech), *Petružel* (Czech), *Petržel kadeřavá* (Czech), *Petržel obecná* (Czech), *Petržilka* (Czech), *Potrasoli* (Sundanese), *Prezzemolo* (Italian), Rock parsley, *Rotpersilja* (Swedish), *Sahradní apich* (Czech), *Tursin* (Maltese), and Venus' herb; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of death, feasting, fecundity (wrapped round carrot), festivity, fickleness, gaiety, useful knowledge, and victory.

Oil of parsley is obtained from the leaves. A greenish essence can be extracted from the seeds. Warning – the oil should be used under the supervision of a qualified practitioner only. Very large quantities of oil or leaf can cause abortion. It can also affect the nervous system and the liver, and cause internal haemorrhages. It should not be used medicinally during pregnancy. Prolonged handling of the plant can cause dermatitis. It is said to be fatally poisonous for small birds, and parrots and wildfowl generally.

Garden parsley's leaves can be confused with those of fool's parsley (*Aethusa cynapium*) which are a darker green, and glossy beneath and have an unpleasant smell, and with monk's-hood (*Aconitum napellus*) and hemlock (*Conium maculatum*). They have also been confused with those of greater celandine (*Chelidonium majus*) and celery-leaved buttercup (*Ranunculus sceleratus*).

Crispum means 'closely curled, finely or irregularly wavy' with reference to the leaves.

By the Middle Ages the name *petroselinum* had become *petrocilium*. Anglicised this progressed through *petersylunge*, *persele*, *perseley* to parsley.

Garden parsley was familiar to the ancient Egyptians. It formed part of the wages of the labourers who worked on the pyramids built by Pharaoh Cheops (26th Century BC).

The ancient Greeks used garden parsley both as decoration in rituals (particularly funerals when it formed part of the adornment on graves) and as a medicine – and they fed it to their chariot horses. They dedicated the plant to Persephone who was known not only as the goddess of the Underworld but also the goddess of Spring. Despite all this however their regard for it seems to have been slightly mixed perhaps in part because of a prevalent legend and its associated symbolism.

The Greek legend in question involves Opheltes, the baby son of King Lycurgus of Nemea. It is told how he was left on the grass by his nurse while she quickly directed some thirsty soldiers to a nearby spring. On her return to the child she found him lying there dead, killed by a snake. One of the soldiers, Amphiarus (a visionary), saw this as an ill omen which predicted his own death in an imminent battle and he immediately gave Opheltes the surname, Archemorus meaning 'first to die'. With this the child became a symbol of impending death and it was said that the first parsley plants sprang from his blood.

The effect of this symbolism can be seen in a factual historical account given by Plutarch (c.46-c.120), the celebrated Greek historian, biographer and philosopher. In this he reported that a group of soldiers making their way to a battle had panicked and fled at the sight of a mule laden with parsley. Yet in contrast records show that garlands of garden parsley were accepted as prizes at some Games – the Greek Nemea and Isthmian Games that were held between 500 BC and 67 AD and also at Roman public games. This practice was however indirectly connected with death too. It was a custom that had originally been practised by the very early Grecians when they held funeral games following the death of an important person.

The expression 'being at the parsley and rue' ie. at the beginning of an exercise, is said to have arisen from a Greek custom of planting garden parsley and rue (*Ruta graveolens*) along the edges of herb beds.

Parsley is one of the at least 36 ingredients used by Mithridates (c.132-63 BC), the 1st Century King of Pontus (northern Turkey), in a poison antidote (known as Antidotum Mithradaticum or Theriac) which he took daily to acquire an overall immunity – an important consideration if it is remembered that he gained his position of power by poisoning his opposition.

It was the Romans who (although they adopted garden parsley for medicinal treatments) developed its culinary uses including that of a garnish. The king of the Franks and Christian emperor of the West, Carolus Magnus Charlemagne (747-814 AD) was said to have enjoyed a cheese from Aix-la-Chapelle so much (it was flavoured with garden parsley seeds) that he had arrangements made for some to be brought to him annually.

Garden parsley is believed to have arrived in Britain from Sardinia only in about 1548.

The introduction of parsley to North America has long been open to debate. Although known written records of it are supposed to date only from 1806, the Italian navigator and explorer, Giovanni da Verrazano (c.1480-1527) is alleged to have seen it growing on the Massachusetts coast in about 1524. As historians are well aware that Norsemen crossed the Atlantic and reached that area (near enough) and come to that Basque fishermen also ended up off Newfoundland, long before then – there is a possibility that he may well have seen parsley.

In Europe by the Middle Ages however garden parsley was being viewed again with some awe – but this time as one of the Devil's favourite plants. Now though its evil connotations could be neutralized if it was sown by a woman under a waxing moon on Good Friday. If the church bells rang during planting (today they do not even need to be ringing) and the woman was of child-bearing years she would be pregnant by the time the seeds had germinated. The long and incomplete germination of the seed itself was accounted for by the belief that the plant went nine times to the Devil and back before germination and that the Devil himself kept some of it. However disaster, even death, could befall the household if garden parsley was transplanted. It was believed that someone could help himself to your plant but that you would be giving your luck away if you gave it to him, and that your lover would die if you cut garden parsley – and any person mentioned by name while you were cutting garden parsley would die within seven days. One old custom held that garden parsley put on food was a sign of goodwill.

A couple of unrelated semi-medicinal European beliefs from the end of the medieval period were that a cure for baldness was dependent upon sprinkling the head three nights a year with parsley seed – and that if garden parsley was picked during a thunderstorm and infused the liquor made an eye-strengthening lotion. There are several superstitions on how to cause a miscarriage and others, held even today, on how to encourage a period. And lastly in the same way that newly born babies were said to have been found under a gooseberry bush (*Ribes uva-crispa*) so also they were said to have come from a garden parsley bed (particularly little girls).

Garden parsley is mentioned in one of the plays of the famous English playwright and poet, William Shakespeare (1564-1616). In about 1592 he wrote *The Taming of the Shrew* in which one of Lucentio's servants, Biondello, tells his master

..... I knew a wench married in an afternoon as she went to the garden for parsley to stuff a rabbit; and so may you, sir;

It is believed to have been introduced to North America in the early 16th Century with the arrival there of some of the European settlers and it was absorbed into the medicine chests of several North American Indian tribes. Both the Cherokee and Micmac Indians used it to treat some urinary disorders, and the former also prescribed it as a remedy for some female problems, fluid retention and kidney ailments.

In North America parsley has collected various superstitious customs. Not least among them are a couple from the USA. Parsley had to be scattered over the kitchen floor in Texas and then swept through to the garden with dust or debris. While in the States of neighbouring Louisiana and Maryland further east parsley could not be sown directly by hand. The seeds had either to be blown off the surface of a *Bible* or from the top of a gatepost.

The roots are one of the ingredients (with those of butcher's-broom *Ruscus aculeatus*, garden asparagus *Asparagus officinalis*, fennel *Foeniculum vulgare* var. *dulce*, and celery *Apium graveolens* var. *dulce*) in a celebrated liqueur called Five Roots Liqueur. Parsley wine is said to be an aphrodisiac.

An edible green dye can be obtained from garden parsley stems. In medieval Europe when food was often garishly coloured it was one of the plants used by the chefs to provide a green colouring. Today garden parsley is to be found in butchers' shops decorating their displays.

The plant was used in veterinary medicine for the treatment of some sheep diseases.

While it would be fairly obvious that garden parsley is used by the food industry, it may be less well known that the essence is an ingredient in some masculine scents and that the pharmaceutical industry uses it in some medicines.

Medicinally, herbalists prescribed garden parsley for women after breastfeeding, and for treating wind in children, ear ailments, jaundice, fluid retention, kidney disorders, plague, fever and cancerous tumours. It has also been used as a poison antidote. Externally it was applied to bites and stings

Today the plant is not only used in cooking but also in medicinal applications. Surprisingly some of the old beliefs also persist in modern form. In addition to the likelihood of pregnancy if a woman sows parsley, it can still be bandied in conversation today that planting the seeds on Good Friday brings extra good luck to the gardener. And it is still a common belief that wherever garden parsley grows strongly the woman is the 'master' in the house and, perhaps less commonly, that whichever partner cultivates it 'wears the trousers'.

It is the birthday flower for 30th October.