

Rosmarinus officinalis

[Synonyms : *Rosmarinus coronarium*, *Rosmarinus lavandulaceus*, *Rosmarinus laxiflorus*, *Rosmarinus officinalis* var. *prostratus*]

ROSEMARY is an evergreen shrub. Native to the Mediterranean coast it has small pale mauve-blue (occasionally white to pink) flowers.

It is also known as Common rosemary, Compass plant, Compass weed, Dew of the sea, *Echter Rosmarin* (German), *Encensier* (French), Garden rosemary, *Klin* (Maltese), Old man, Polar plant, *Ramerino* (Italian), *Romarin* (French), *Romero* (Spanish), Rose-of-the-sea, *Rosmareno oficina* (Esperanto), *Rosmariini* (Finnish), *Rosmarin* (German, Swedish), *Rosmarino* (Italian), *Rozemarijn* (Dutch), *Rozmarýna* (Czech), *Rozmarýn lékařský* (Czech), *Rusmari* (Hindi), Southernwood, and Wild rosemary; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of affectionate remembrance, fidelity, remember me, remembrance, and ‘your presence revives me’.

Oil of rosemary is extracted from the leaves and flowering tops.

Warning – the oil must not be used internally. Very large doses of the leaves are poisonous and can cause abortion, convulsions, vertigo and occasionally death. The plant should not be taken internally (medicinally) during pregnancy. Prolonged handling of the plant or the extracted oil (either alone or in cosmetics) can cause dermatitis for some people.

Officinalis means ‘of the shop (usually the apothecary’s or herbalist’s)’. Certain plants used for medicinal purposes, whether of actual or legendary value, were kept readily available and acquired this name.

The old French name for rosemary was *incensier* – no doubt because the plant was burnt as incense in many early religious rituals.

Some authorities believe that the ancient Egyptians were familiar with rosemary and that it featured in their burial ceremonies. However this appears still to be open to debate.

The ancient Greeks and the Romans believed rosemary could improve the memory and quicken the mind and therefore wove it into their hair (particularly students who were studying for examinations). The Greeks burnt it as incense, and both they and the Romans used it in public and private festivities, as well as religious ceremonies.

Rosemary has strong legendary links with Christianity. In Spain it is still revered as the bush that sheltered the Virgin Mary when she fled to Egypt. Tradition tells how the flowers changed from white to varying shades of blue when she threw her cloak over it to dry. Its height, which rarely exceeds that of a man, is accounted for by the belief that it grew to that of Jesus Christ in 32 years and thereafter grew thicker but no higher. Other lore describes how rosemary was hung as decoration in early churches to welcome fairies and elves. For some Christians in more recent times rosemary represents the Nativity of Christ.

From 800-814 AD, the reign of Charlemagne (747-814) king of the Franks and Christian emperor of the West, rosemary became a popular flower at weddings in Europe and was associated with fidelity, love and happy memories. Sprigs or small branches (often gilded) were carried by members of the wedding party and the bride wore it as a garland (a custom that can still be seen today).

Rosemary attracted a surprising number of seemingly unrelated and diverse beliefs and customs during the Middle Ages in various countries in Europe. In Britain a piece under the pillow or under the bed would ward off evil spirits and bad dreams, and it also offered protection against witches. If a young man or girl tapped the other on the finger with a blooming sprig of rosemary they would fall in love and marry. Some people still believe today that to sniff a box made from rosemary wood will reveal the secret of eternal youth. A thriving plant outside an English home signified that the woman wore the trousers in the household. (It was said that the man concerned would cut the roots in the dead of night to hide this apparent domination from passersby.) Baldness could be cured if a comb of rosemary wood was used. Any man who showed indifference to rosemary's perfume was incapable of offering true love to a woman. As protection against poisoning one drank from a rosemary wood spoon. The application of rosemary powder to the body would put that person in a merry mood. Smelling rosemary would often keep a person young – and so on and so forth. Belgian children were once told that babies came from rosemary plants. And a French belief contended that combing the hair everyday with rosemary wood prevented giddiness. Sicilians would tell you that young fairies in the guise of snakes lay among rosemary's branches. Today it is said that rosemary will only grow in the gardens of the righteous.

Its association with 'happy memories of loved ones' led to its use at funerals in Britain in the 17th to mid-19th Centuries especially, when mourners brought sprigs and dropped them on the grave. (At the beginning of the 20th Century this practice could still be found occasionally in Wales.) Robert Herrick (1591-1674), the English poet, recalls both associations in his poem *The Garden*. Apart from connections with the mulberry (*Morus nigra*), the famous English bard William Shakespeare (1564-1616) also seems to be linked with rosemary. This features, with daffodils (*Narcissus pseudonarcissus*) and pansies (*Viola x wittrockiana*), in the buttonholes and posies devotees carry during the annual Shakespeare Birthday Celebrations at Stratford-upon-Avon. Even today a sprig of rosemary is worn on Anzac Day (25th April) in Australia, a remembrance day first kept there in 1916 in memory of those who fell in battle.

Wedding, Christmas and New Year celebrations also had their traditional customs in Europe when rosemary featured as an important part – and some of them were many centuries old. At Christmas the company's health was drunk from the wassail bowl which was decorated with rosemary, and at large Christmas feasts the ceremonially paraded boar's head would also be garlanded with it (as bay, *Laurus nobilis*, graced joints of roast beef). New Year gifts once comprised a branch of rosemary with a clove studded (*Syzygium aromaticum*) orange (*Citrus sinensis*). At weddings rosemary seems to have been of considerable importance. In 1540 the German princess, Anne of Cleves (1515-1557) married Henry VIII of England and at her wedding she is said to have worn a gold circlet encrusted with precious stones and rosemary twigs. Bridesmaids used to present the bridegroom with a bunch of rosemary as a symbol of his responsibilities in his married life, and it would also have been carried by the bride as a reminder of the love and protection afforded her in her parents' home. After the service one of the bridesmaids would plant a sprig of the shrub in the garden of the bride's new home to perpetuate the past experience, which in due time would be expected to be handed on to the bride's daughter.

Despite a wealth of documented history of rosemary's presence in Britain earlier, a delightful explanation has been preferred by some that describes how it may only have been introduced to that Country in the middle of the 14th Century. This maintains that the Countess of Hainault, mother of Edward III's wife Queen Philippa (c.1314-1369), sent the first rosemary plants to her daughter in England. Their might be some truth in this.

Certainly the library of Trinity College, Cambridge has been custodian of an old manuscript from which it is clear, a translator claims, that the plant was unknown in England before that time.

Rosemary has taken its place in English literature. Sir Thomas More (1478-1535), who was canonized in 1935 but is more usually remembered as a celebrated English politician and scholar, wrote

As for rosemary, I let it run all over my garden walls, not only because my bees love it but because it is the herb sacred to remembrance and to friendship, whence a sprig of it hath a dumb language.

Then the famous English playwright and poet, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) includes reference to it in several plays. In *Pericles* he writes

.....'Would she had never come within my doors! - Marry, hang you! - She's born to undo us. - Will you not go the way of women-kind? Marry, come up, my dish of chastity with rosemary and bays!

and in *Hamlet*

There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray you, love, remember:

While his peer Robert Herrick (1591-1674) wrote

Grow for two ends, it matters not at all,
Be't for my bridall or my buriall.

Distillation to extract the oil it is still used by the perfumery industry. A famous cosmetic preparation in which rosemary was the prime ingredient was the floral water known as Hungary water made for Queen Isabella of Hungary. According to legend when 72 years old and suffering severe ill health it is alleged that she used this water to restore her youth and beauty and received a marriage proposal from the then King of Poland.

Rosemary's disinfectant and antiseptic properties have also been valued in the past (although it is probable that in bygone centuries these were not understood as they are today). It was believed to be able to give protection against plague. The floors of the law courts used to be strewn with rosemary branches (as were those of sick rooms in order to purify the air, particularly in France where rosemary was often burnt with juniper berries, *Juniperus communis*) and walking stick handles were hollowed out as a container for the plant so that it could be inhaled when walking through infected areas.

Many of these practices are remembered today in the modern British custom that occurs on Maundy Thursday, the day before Good Friday in the Christian calendar. The Maundy money, usually a specially minted silver penny for every year of the monarch's age, is distributed by the Queen to a similar number of elderly people. She herself is presented with a traditional nosegay that customarily contains daffodils (*Narcissus pseudonarcissus*), primroses (*Primula vulgaris*), rosemary, thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*), violets (*Viola odorata*) and hoary stock (*Matthiola incana*), recalling the 'protective' nosegays carried in the past.

Recent research (1987) at Rutgers University in the United States has led to a new use for the plant. An extremely stable food preservative derived from rosemary has been patented. Authorities suspect it is likely that this discovery will have significant implications for the food packaging (plastic film) and cosmetics industries particularly.

As a flavouring rosemary is traditional in Italian dishes, and Narbonne in France is famed for its rosemary honey.

Rosemary also has moth repellent properties. Some Mediterranean villages spread out their linen over rosemary branches to dry in the sun and extract the moth-repellent aroma.

At the beginning of the 21st Century rosemary has many commercial applications. These include its use as an ingredient in cosmetic creams and lotions, and in hair tonics and shampoos. The toiletry industry includes it in soaps, bath essences and deodorant sprays, and it can be chosen for perfumes and eau de colognes. It also provides a flavouring for canned and baked foods, confectionery and sausages, and is used by the drinks industry in liqueurs as well. Not least it can be found in some slimming preparations, and the pharmaceutical industry can use it in eyewashes and proprietary medicines.

Medicinally, it has long been appreciated on the European mainland but it was not until the 14th Century that it was recognized in England for its medicinal qualities. At one time toothache was thought to be eased by applying the ashes from burnt twigs to the offending tooth, and the pain of gout could also be eased by binding twigs of rosemary around the offending limbs. Herbalists used to recommend rosemary also for treating colds, headaches, fluid retention, nervous disorders and stomach upsets. Today it is still popular in folk medicine, is also recognized as a digestive aid, and can be used fresh in homoeopathic treatments.

It is the birthday flower for 17th January.