

Ruta graveolens

[Synonyms : *Graveolens officinalis*, *Ruta hortensis*]

RUE (English, French) is a semi-evergreen or evergreen perennial or subshrub. Native to southern Europe (from the southern Alps) and to northern Africa, it has small fragrant, yellow or yellowish-green flowers.

It is also known as *Arroda* (Spanish-Basque), *Aruda* (Malay, Telugu), *Arudha* (Singhalese), *Arvada* (Tamil), Ave grace, Bitter herb, Common rue, Countryman's treacle, *Daun inggu* (Sundanese), *Ermul* (Bengali), Garden rue, *Garten Raute* (German), German rue, *Godong minggu* (Javanese), Grace, *Hèrbe dé grace* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Herbe d'grâce* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), Herb-grace, Herb impia, Herb of grace, Herb of repentance, Herbygrass, Meadow rue, *Raute* (German), *Routa vonná* (Czech), *Ruda* (Spanish), *Rue des jardins* (French), *Ruta* (Italian), Ruth, *Sadab* (Hindi), *Sazab* (Urdu), *Sazabotu* (Turkish), *Sedefotu* (Turkish), Serving-man's joy, *Somalata* (Sanskrit), *Sudab* (Punjabi), *Tirumuti-patchi* (Tamil), *Tuoksuruuta* (Finnish), *Vinruta* (Swedish), *Weinraute* (German), *Wijnruit* (Dutch), *Wynruit* (Afrikaans), and *Yun-hsiang-ts'au* (Chinese); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of 'an antidote', bitterness, disdain, fertility, grace, mercy, pity, purification, repentance, and sorrow.

Essence or oil in the form of a pale yellow liquid is extracted from the flowering plant.

Warning – must only be used by qualified practitioners. Large (let alone smaller) doses of the plant are poisonous and can cause flushed skin, irritation of the lungs, vomiting, collapse, vertigo and mental confusion. The plant must not be taken internally during pregnancy. Allergic reactions can be obtained by handling the plant eg. dermatitis, extreme skin sensitivity to sunlight. The oil can cause death.

This plant is of a completely different family to that of **goat's-rue** (*Galega officinalis*).

Graveolens is derived from Latin *gravis* (heavy, weighty) and *oleo* (to emit an odour, smell) components meaning 'strong-smelling or heavily-scented'.

When Aristotle (384-322 BC) the famous Greek philosopher and scientist, was alive he noted that there was widespread belief in rue's ability to protect against evil and those Greeks who suspected strangers of having evil powers relied upon the plant to counter the nervousness they experienced whenever they had to eat with foreigners.

The Romans used rue medicinally and to garnish food

Mithridates (c.132-63 BC), the 1st Century King of Pontus (northern Turkey), included rue as one of at least 36 ingredients in a poison antidote (known as Antidotum Mithridaticum or Theriac) which he took daily to acquire an overall immunity – an important consideration if it is remembered that he gained power by poisoning his opposition. The effectiveness of the potion in which it was included added support to the belief held then that the plant was able to offer protection against magic and witchcraft, and it came to be the forerunner of potions that were eventually known as 'electuaries'. Until the mid-19th Century these expensive panaceas (with their secret ingredients) were available throughout Europe under various names.

Pliny (23-79 AD) the Roman author and naturalist, reported that painters, carvers and engravers ate rue to improve their eyesight.

Rue was also familiar to the Ancient Britons. When the Christian missionaries arrived there they blessed congregations with rue branches sprinkled with holy water as the rue was already so highly esteemed among their burgeoning faithful that it had acquired a sacred status.

In Europe the Middle Ages saw the perpetuation of the beliefs in the protection against evil, to which umbrellas were added witches and plague. (However the witches themselves would often use rue in their own concoctions.) These medieval convictions were further maintained and supplemented by alleged metaphysical powers (and qualities that enhanced clarity of vision) in the 15th and 16th Centuries. The combined effect of all these beliefs was supposed to have aided both Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) the celebrated Italian architect, engineer, painter and sculptor, and his younger compatriot Michelagnolo di Lodovico Buonarotti, more familiar as Michelangelo (1475-1564) the famous painter, sculptor, and poet.

This period saw rue being used in liqueurs and also as a traditional ingredient for flavouring hippocras (a popular spicy drink of the time which was based upon red or white wine). Today some authorities report that inhabitants of Hong Kong use rue to flavour sweetened red beans.

Rue has managed to cultivate a surprising hold in English literature. References to it are many and include in *The Man of Lawes Tale* written by Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1345-1400)

Rewe on my child, that of thyn gentilnesse
Rewest on every sinful in destresse.

Two centuries later the well-known dramatist, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) also mentions rue in several of his plays, sometimes as ‘rue’ and on other occasions as ‘herb of grace’ – or both. In *Richard II* he wrote

Poor queen! so that thy state might be no worse
I would my skill were subject to thy curse. -
Here did she fall a tear; here, in this place,
I'll set a bank of rue, sour herb of grace;
Rue, even for ruth, here shortly shall be seen,
In remembrance of a weeping queen.

Then rue can also be found in *Paradise Lost* by John Milton (1608-1674).

.....To nobler sights
Michael from Adam's eyes the filme removed
Which that false fruit which promised clearer sight
Had bred; then purged with euphrasie and rue
The visual nerve, for he had much to see:

By the 16th and 17th Centuries greater store was beginning to be placed on medicinal and disinfectant qualities than those of food flavouring, for which reason the plant was scattered as a fumigant over the floors of law courts (a practice which continued well into the 18th Century) and judges carried stems of it to ward off jail fever. It was also an ingredient (with garlic, *Allium sativum*) in the mixture that some authorities say some men took when they were robbing corpses as a protection from plague when it hit London in 1665. Others believe it was known as ‘Four Thieves’ Vinegar’, the potion upon which four Marseilles thieves were said to depend under similar circumstances.

Use of its fumigant qualities are perpetuated in some areas to this day – although the pragmatic reason may have been forgotten. On the Mediterranean island of Sardinia rue can still be strewn around a room containing a body awaiting burial. The association of rue with death is such an entrenched part of Sardinian local psyche that attempts by any newcomers to cultivate the plant can be met with persistent and surreptitious antagonism – so much so that in the dead of night the plants could be uprooted and destroyed.

For some people the potency of rue was considered to be enhanced if it was grown under a fig tree (*Ficus carica*) while others believed that you had a strong plant if it was stolen from a neighbour's garden. No doubt rue picked from either plant would only have strengthened the belief that you could never miss your target if you used shot that had been boiled in rue.

The plant has been depicted particularly in the heraldic device for the British Order of the Thistle and in the coat of arms of the Dukedom of Saxony. In 1902 while still Prince of Wales, George V (1865-1936) before he ascended the British throne in 1910, was conferred with the Order of Rautenkron (Crown of Rue) by the King of Saxony.

Rue has influenced the shape of the leaves in the design of the clubs suit on playing cards in some countries.

Some say that a weasel will eat rue before attacking a snake. Whatever the truth of this rue was certainly used in veterinary medicine, particularly in treating some cattle diseases and also croup in poultry. Distilled water from the plant was also believed to be able to kill fleas.

As a flavouring, particularly in drinks, it is banned in France today, but Italy still uses rue as a flavouring ingredient in *grappa* (a small bunch of fresh sprigs of rue are steeped in the brandy in each bottle). Arabs also add it to suspect water to combat any ill effects from drinking it.

It was through the Arabs (and the Persians) in past centuries that rue probably spread to some of the countries in south-eastern Asia. It reached India overland and ultimately became so popular there that certainly at the beginning of the 20th Century it was a familiar sight in that Country.

At some point rue reached North America as records show that both the Diegueño and Cherokee Indian tribes became familiar with it and included it in their medicinal repertoires. The former took a leaf infusion for stomach upsets and used it to ease earache, while the Cherokee valued it as a sedative, prescribed it for worms and applied it in the form of a poultice to gangrenous limbs.

Today rue is used on a commercial scale for a wide range of products. The drinks industry uses both the plant (the Italian grape spirit, *Grappa con ruta* is flavoured with it by immersing the plant in the liquor and allowing it to infuse) and the essence (in vermouth and bitters). Rue also provides a flavouring for the food industry eg. in baked products. The essential oil is used by the perfumery and toiletry industries uses (the latter in soaps and skin creams).

Medicinally, herbalists used to recommend the plant for treating rabies, flatulence, epilepsy, vertigo, convulsions and coughs – but the rue needed to have been harvested and taken in the morning as it would be poisonous if picked (or swallowed) any later in the day.

Both the distinctive very bitter flavour and a dangerous reputation have probably contributed to its decline in use medicinally today in the West although it can be an ingredient today in ophthalmological drugs, and it is also used in homeopathic treatments. The plant still features in folk medicine in many other countries however including India, Iran, Lebanon, Palestine (where it is still used to treat rheumatism and ear-ache) and Mexico. Chinese herbal medicine uses rue particularly in the treatment of insect and snake bites. [In some parts of China it is cultivated because of an anti-malarial reputation.]

It is the birthday flower for 18th January.