

### *Salvia officinalis*

**SAGE** is a semi-evergreen subshrub (grown as an annual or biennial). Native to southern Europe (particularly the Mediterranean) it has small light blue to purple (sometimes white or pink) flowers.

It is also known as *Alisfakia* (Greek), *Babské ucho* (Czech), Berggarten sage, Common sage, *Echter Salbei* (German), *Echte Salie* (Dutch), Garden sage, *Gartensalbei* (German), *Grande sauge* (French), Herb sage, Kitchen sage, *Koničky* (Czech), *Kryddsalvia* (Swedish), *Küchensalbei* (German), *Lysfakia* (Greek), Meadow sage, Red sage, *Ryytisalvia* (Finnish), *Salbei* (German), *Šalvěj lékařská* (Czech), *Salvia* (Hindi, Italian, Slovak, Spanish), *Šalvia lakárska* (Slovak), *Salvio oficina* (Esperanto), *Sauge* (French), *Sefakuss* (Hindi), *Smrtky* (Czech), Spanish sage, *Shu-wei-t'sao* (Chinese), and True sage; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of domestic virtue, esteem, and mutual love.

Warning – large doses (or the plant taken medicinally over a long period) can be poisonous and can affect both the central nervous system and blood flow. It can cause indigestion for some people. It should not be taken medicinally internally during pregnancy.

*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.

Both the ancient Greeks and the Romans used sage as an antidote for snake bites. It was familiar as a medicine to the three famous Greek physicians, Hippocrates (c.460-377 or 359 BC) often known as the ‘father of medicine’, Pedanius Dioscorides who lived in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, and Galen (c.130-c.201). In Roman times sage was revered as a sacred plant that had to be collected in accordance with certain customs, and the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Roman gourmet, Marcus Gavius Apicius used it for flavouring food. Then later on cultivation of sage was also encouraged in monastery gardens within his Empire by Charlemagne (747-814) when he was king of the Franks and Christian emperor of the west.

Sage must have been introduced to Britain early on as authorities note that the Druids (they arrived in Britain in about 3 BC) respected the plant to such a degree that they believed it could revive the dead. Much later in Elizabethan times in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century it was familiar there as a seasoning in meat pies – and for centuries has been a traditional English flavouring for stuffing to accompany duck (or other poultry).

As a love oracle sage was the subject of various local customs. For instance in England a leaf carefully gathered at each stroke of the clock at midnight on Hallowe’en (or twelve leaves picked on Christmas Eve) would enable a young girl to see an indistinct image of her future husband.

Sage was also associated in a benign way with bereavement in England as the leaves were believed to be able to ease grief and as sage leaves wither very slowly they were scattered over graves as a symbol of remembrance. Samuel Pepys (1633-1703) the English diarist, mentions a churchyard in which it was the practice to plant sage on all the graves. (Authorities have noted that some people subscribed to a belief that the sustained use of sage would bestow immortality and that this might also have explained its cultivation in cemeteries.)

English folklore suggested that sage would only flourish in a garden where the woman dominated the house

If the sagebush thrives and grows,  
The master's not master – and he knows!

or alternatively that its ability to thrive mirrored the fortunes of the man of the house, prospering or failing as he did. It is said that husbands have been known in days gone by to cut down a strong bush in order to avoid their neighbours' ridicule. On the other hand many held that a man would never die if he grew sage in his garden.

The plant has been used to make sage ale and sage tea. In the 17<sup>th</sup> Century the Chinese preference for sage tea over their own enabled Dutch merchants on occasion to negotiate a trade of 3 tea chests of China tea (*Camellia sinensis*) for one of sage. Today the food industry uses the leaves and the essential oil for flavouring meats and cheeses, and the leaves are also used for flavouring by the drinks industry.

Its cleansing properties were particularly applied to teeth as it was believed that sage could whiten them – and strengthen the gums. In England those who took the waters at the southern spa town of Tunbridge Wells used to be offered sage leaves to eradicate the iron stains that appeared on their teeth.

Apparently the plant is normally avoided by animals which are believed to dislike its smell.

One amphibian, the toad, is said to be an exception however.

Cosmetically sage has long been used to enhance dark highlights in hair and has also been an ingredient in astringent skin lotions.

Monks are believed to have been the first to grow sage in Britain. It was considered to have the greatest potency for medicinal purposes at the end of Spring before the plant began to flower. One fascinating claim recorded surprisingly by the English physician, Nicholas Culpeper (1616-1654) was that sage was used to cure bites from 'stingrays'. (One wonders if this was a name used then for something other than a fish.)

At some point this species of sage was introduced to North America (no doubt by European settlers) and came to the attention of some of the Indian tribes there. Records show that both the Mohican and Cherokee Indians respected its medicinal properties. While the former took it as a tonic and to get rid of worms, the Cherokees valued it as a laxative, sedative, an agent to cause sweating and a stimulant (and they also prescribed it for asthma, diarrhoea, coughs and colds).

Sage is used commercially today as a fixative by the perfumery industry and its essence is used by the cosmetics and toiletry industries as well (the latter in toothpastes and as a tincture in dandruff shampoos).

Herbalists recommended the plant for many ailments, including erysipelas (inflammation usually recognised by red facial blotches), fever, liver and kidney disorders, colds, tonsillitis, measles, period problems, asthma, rheumatism, stemming blood in wounds, expelling afterbirth, sore throats and coughs, as well as for cleansing ulcers, sores and snake bites. Today sage can be used to help reduce perspiration but its greatest service is likely to be viewed in its role as a gargle or mouthwash for treating tonsillitis, pharyngitis, mouth ulcers, sore gums and other oral problems. Sage is also used fresh in homoeopathic remedies.

It is the birthday flower for 19<sup>th</sup> January.