

Pre-17th Century Uses of Mint

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When I first started this paper in 1984, I had planned to write about the herbs and flowers growing in my own garden, including elder, carnation, parsley, rose and mint. When I came to mint and discovered how extensive the mint family was, I discarded all else and concentrated on members of this grouping only. Recipes noted in this article are from pre-17th century sources. Most illustrations are 18th century botanical illustrations.

"Lerne the hygh and marvelous vertue of herbes. Know how inestimable a preservative to the helth of man God hath provyded growyng every day at our hands, use the effects with reverence and give thanks to the maker celestyall. Behold how much it exceedeth to use medecyne of efficacye naturall, by God ordeyned, than wicked wordes or charmes of efficacye unnaturall by the divyll invented."

For centuries all the gardens in England were herb gardens, and beautiful they must have been, for all manner of flowers were used as herbs for stuffings and stews, decorations and strewing, perfumes and medicines. The kitchen garden as we know it is quite modern, and during the many centuries when "vegetables" were not as well known or available, people relied on the health-giving properties of herbs. We have come to look upon health as the absence of disease. But the old herbalists tell us that herbs were used not only to cure, but to keep one in perfect health as well.

The very name "herb garden" suggests rest and tranquility, a quiet enclosure full of sunlight and scent. If we revive the old English herb garden, it should be that of the 14th-15th centuries, for at no time were herb gardens more beautiful. These rectangular enclosures were surrounded by a wall or hedge and surrounded by a bank of earth planted with sweet-smelling herbs, patterned after those surrounding 13th century monastic gardens. At intervals recesses were cut to serve as seats, which were covered with turf, *"thick yset and soft as any velvet"*. There was also nearly always a herber, which consisted of poles covered with plants *"of a fragrant savoure"* and which were so constructed *"that the Owner's friends sitting in the same may the frelier see and behold the beautie of the garden to theyr great delyght."*

Mint (*Labaiatae Orlamiaceae, of the genus Mentha*) is an aromatic, of which there are twenty-five families. Legend has it that Minthe was a nymph, who because of

the love Pluto bore for her, was metamorphosed by Prosperine, Pluto's wife, into the plant which now bears her name. Mint also symbolizes high spirits. It decorated banquet tables at Roman feasts and was worn as laurels to Roman feasts as well. It is believed to have been introduced to England by the Romans. It was grown in convent gardens as early as the 9th century and now grows wild in several countries around the globe. It has been highly esteemed for years as a calmative for upset stomachs and cranky babies. It was also used in dairies to dry up the milk supply of sick and pregnant cows.

The three chief species of mint are Spearmint, Peppermint and Pennyroyal.



Peppermint (*M. Piperita*) is considered the most important of the three species, being the most potent and soothing. Its' aroma was considered a source of strength which would re-animate the spirits and was used in baths to comfort and strengthen the nerves. Peppermint tea was also used to treat nausea, diarrhea, heartburn, chills, fever and abdominal cramps. Though it is mentioned in the Icelandic Pharmacopoeias of the 13th century, it was not fully recognized in Europe as a medicinal until the late 17th century.

Spearmint (*M. Viridis*) is most often used in cooking to season jellies, sauces and beverages. Its medicinal properties are like those of peppermint but are less powerful, and are better adapted for use with children. Spearmint was used to treat bee stings and as a gargle for a sore throat. In the 14th century its fresh leaves were crushed and rubbed on the teeth to whiten them.

European Pennyroyal (*M. Pulegium*) was named by Pliny for its reputation of driving away fleas. In the Middle Ages it was called Piliolle-Rial, a corruption from the Latin. Pennyroyal is also referred to as Common European Wild Mint. It has an intense scent and is used to repel ticks, mosquitoes and fleas. In tea form, Pennyroyal was used to remedy colds and menstrual problems. It was hung in sleeping rooms, being thought to be conducive to sleep even more so than roses. Pennyroyal was also reputed to be poisonous in large quantities.

Mint Butter: take a handful of mint leaves and a handful of parsley, and boil slowly for five minutes in the smallest quantity of water possible. Drain and rub the pulp through a sieve. Work it into four ounces of butter until smooth. Season further with black or cayenne pepper.

As stated previously, the genus *Mentha* encompasses a large variety of herbs. Included in this category are Balm, Bugle, Hoarhound, Hyssop, Marejoram, Sage and Thyme.



Balm (*Melissa Officinalis*) also known in Middle English as Baume, is short for Balsam, the chief of sweet smelling oils. It was formerly thought to be of great use in complaints caused by a disordered state of the nervous system. The name comes from the Greek *mellisa*, meaning bee. John Gerard, a 16th century herbalist, stated that beehives rubbed with balm “*causeth the bees to keep together and causeth others to come unto them*”. He also noted that when Balm was applied to wounds, it closed them without peril of inflammation. (At the time this article was written, balm was still a component of modern day surgical dressings). Pracelsus, a 15th century Swiss physician, used Balm as an ingredient in his elixir vitae, which he hoped to “*renovate man and make him next to immortal*.” It was also thought to be “*greatly esteemed of students...for it sharpeneth the understanding and encreaseth memory*.”

A Refreshing Drink in Fever: put two sprigs of Balm and a little wood sorrel into a stone-jug; peel thin a small lemon and clear from the white; slice it and put a bit of peel in; then pour in three pints of boiling water, sweeten and cover it close.

Common Bugle (*Ajuga Reptans*) is possibly a corruption of the Latin *abija*, derived from the Latin *abigo* (*to drive away*), so named for its great curative powers. It was thought to be good for the bad effects of excessive drinking, and is still considered useful as a tea to arrest hemorrhages.

Yellow Bugle (*A. Pyramidalis*) is scarce in England outside of the counties of Kent, Surrey and Essex. It was considered a remedy for gout and rheumatism when combined with other herbs, and was used by itself as a tea in the treatment of feminine disorders.

An Infusion of Bugle: an ounce of dried herb to a pint of boiling water, being given frequently by the wineglassful for the treatment of cough.



Black Horehound (*Ballota Nigra*) is the variety found in Europe. Its name is derived from the Greek *ballo* (*to reject*) because cattle won't eat it. Horehound is a stimulant and antispasmodic and is used in syrup form for colds, cough and hoarseness. During the medieval period it was thought to be an antidote for the bite of a mad dog.

Hoarhound Tea: on one ounce of the fresh leaves pour one pint of boiling water. Sweeten with honey and make hot with cayenne, to which add a teaspoonful of vinegar. Drink hot at bedtime.

Hyssop (*Hyssopus Officinalis*) is named after the Greek azob (holy herb), used for cleaning holy places. Hyssop was one of the strewing herbs (strewn on the floor to sweeten the air and to keep the bugs and dust contained in medieval and early renaissance buildings) and was also used in

pottages and salads. As a tea it was used for lung complaints and inflammations of the mucous membranes. Hyssop tops were boiled and given for asthma. Its' fresh leaves were crushed and applied to bruises.



Syrup of Hyssop for Colds: take an handful of Hysop, of Figs, Raysins, Dates, of each an ounce, French Barley one ounce, boyl therein three pintes of fair water to a quart, strain it and clarifie it with two Whites of Eggs, then put in two pound of find Sugar and boyl it to a

Syrup. **Marjoram** (*Origanum marjorana*) is a derivative of the Greek words *oros* (a mountain) and *ganos* (splendor), in reference to the habitation of the plants. The Greeks thought that the goddess Aphrodite first cultivated it, and that it was her touch that caused its sweet fragrance. Another story tells of a youth named Marjoram, who, while carrying a vase of perfumes, dropped it. In terror he lost consciousness and was metamorphosed into the herb.

Greeks used Marjoram to remedy poisons, convulsion and dropsy. Young Greek and Roman couples were crowned with it. It was a favorite strewing herb in the 16th century, and was also a favorite for sachets or "swete bags" because of its pine scent. The leaves and extracted oil were renowned for their healing capacity, the oil being applied to a sore tooth to reduce pain. When

mixed with olive oil, the Oil of Marjoram became a lotion and was thought to relieve varicose veins, gout and rheumatism.

Marjoram tea was taken externally for earache, and its leaves were often smoked or used as snuff. The flower tops of the thirty varieties were used in the country to stain wool purple, and linen reddish-brown, though this was not a durable dye. Marjoram was also used in ale-brewing as an aromatic and a preservative.

On St. Luke's Day, take marigold flowers, a sprig of marjoram, thyme and a little wormwood; dry them before a fire, rub them to powder, then sift it through a fine piece of lawn, and simmer it over a slow fire, adding a small quantity of virgin honey and vinegar. Anoint yourself with this when you go to bed, saying the following line three times: "St. Luke, St. Luke, be kind to me, In dreams let me my true love see..."

Garden Sage (*Salvia Officinalis*) is named from the Latin *salvus* (*safe*) on account of the reputed virtues of the plant. Sage was sacred to the Greeks, and was thought to prolong life. In early Dutch trading days, the Chinese so preferred Sage tea that they would trade three pounds of their choicest domestic teas in exchange for a single pound of Sage. Sage was a well-known garden herb in the 16th century. It was used to flavor bread and cheese, and the tea was considered useful in the treatment of fevers, colds and sore throats. The leaves were used to darken grey hair, as a tooth cleaner, and when smoked in a pipe was reputed to be good for asthma. Sage was hung in dairies, stables and byres to sweeten the atmosphere and to catch flies, and was used as a strewing herb in homes.

Common Clary Sage (*S. Sclarea*) was introduced to England in 1562. Its Latin term was *clarus* (*clear*), and was popularly known as Clear Eye, the seeds of which, when placed in the eye, would clear it of matter and debris.



For a Sore Throat or Cough: *Pour half a pint of boiling water on a handful of sage leaves, and when moderately cool add a little vinegar and honey. Take a teaspoonful at a time, use also as a gargle.*

Thyme (*Thymus*) encompasses about 300 varieties, 40 of which were known during the medieval period. In Greek, *thymus* meant courage, and was held to be a source of bravery, courage, and valiant energy both in ancient and medieval times. Romans used it to remedy melancholy. To the Greeks it was a symbol of elegance; to smell of thyme was an expression of praise applied to those whose style was admirable. During the 15th century, ladies embroidered a bee hovering over a sprig of thyme onto scarves, which they bestowed upon their knights as favors, along with sprigs of thyme to inspire courage and strength.

Thyme was scarce in England, rare in Scotland and very rare in Ireland, so most was imported from the continent. It was considered to attract bees and to be a favorite flower of faeries. Wherever thyme grew, pure atmosphere was said to abound. Thyme was used as an herbal substitute for pepper.

As a tea it was recommended for warming the aged. It was used to treat throat and bronchial irritation and to control whooping cough. Thyme was thought to be a cure for snakebite and bruises, and was used to whiten the skin. It was also an embalming herb.

- **To Enable One to See Faeries:** *A pint of sallet oyle and put it into a vial glasse; and first wash it with rose-water and marygolde water; the flowers to be gathered towards the east. Wash it till the oyle becomes white, then put into the glasses, and then put thereto the buds of hollyhocke, the flowers of marygolde, the flowers or toppes of wild thyme the buds of young hazle, and the thyme must be gathered near the side of a hill where faeries use to be; and take the grasse of a faerie throne; then all these put into the oyle in the glasse and sette it to dissolve three dayes in the sunne and then keep it for thy use.*

Although herbs were cultivated, some were imported and even more were gathered wild, to be kept and dried for winter use. Those of us who are fortunate enough to have herb gardens should not neglect the use of our herbs wild counterparts. As a 15th century herbalist once wrote: *“Herbes that grow in the fieldes be bettere than those that growe in gardens. And those that grow on the hillis be best”*.

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