



LEMON BALM

Latin: *Melissa officinalis*

Welsh: Gwennyddail

A lemon-scented perennial with green leaves and insignificant white flowers.

This ancient herb, dedicated to the goddess Diana, was used medicinally by the Greeks some 2000 years ago.

The plant was brought to Britain by the Romans who valued it as a strewing herb and for its many culinary uses.

Until the C15th it was known as *melisiphyllon* (Greek: bee leaf) or *apiastrum* (Latin: bee plant), its modern botanical name deriving from *melissa* (Greek: bee). Balm is an abbreviation for balsam, a reference to its sweet aroma.

Originally, its main importance was as a plant attractive to bees. The Greeks believed that sprigs of the plant put into empty hives would attract a swarm, and that if Balm was planted near beehives the resident bees would never go away. This belief was still prevalent in medieval times when honey was a luxury. It is still planted near beehives and in gardens to attract the bees.

In the Middle Ages Lemon Balm was used to soothe tension, dress wounds and as a cure for ailments as diverse as toothache, mad dog bites, crooked necks and sickness during pregnancy. It was even said to cure baldness! And amulets were filled with Lemon Balm as lucky love charms

Long praised as a wonderful medicine to clear the mind, raise the spirits and improve the memory, Lemon Balm was recommended to Oxford University students to drive away 'heaviness of mind' and 'sharpen the understanding'. As a tonic to cure melancholy, it was praised by herbalists for centuries and is still used in aromatherapy to counter depression. Recent research by the University of Northumbria has supported claims that the plant can be used to improve memory and increase calmness.

Melissa tea was long reputed to promote longevity, and in the C17th Carmelite nuns in Paris made it into Carmelite tea for this purpose.

Medicinal values (of fresh or dried leaves)

As a tea it has proved effective in the treatment of minor gastric upsets ... nervous indigestion, colic, wind, nausea and headache.

It has also been used in conjunction with other remedies to treat nervous tachycardia and restlessness, and to promote restful sleep.

Its anti-spasmodic properties have been used to relieve period pain.

As a hot infusion it helps to reduce fever and clear catarrhal congestion.

It is also considered to be effective in relieving hay fever and other allergies.

The leaf is soothing when rubbed on insect bites.

The oil was once used as a diaphoretic (to increase perspiration) in the treatment of fevers, but it is slightly toxic.

Culinary Uses

Leaves can be added to summer drinks and fruit cups, and to vinegar.

Added to salads and to fish and vegetable dishes the leaves add a delicate lemon flavour

Chopped leaves can be mixed with soft cheeses.

Lemon Balm has frequently been incorporated into proprietary cordials for liqueurs and it is an important constituent of several well-known liqueurs including Benedictine and Chartreuse. Its popularity in France has earned it the name *Thè de France*.

A recipe for 'Lemon Balm and Poppy Seed ice-cream' appeared in the Food & Drink section of *The Daily Telegraph* in June 2009!!

Cosmetic Usage

Lemon Balm is a frequent constituent of herbal shampoos.