

Basil



In addition to its culinary uses, basil is also used in perfumes, soaps, shampoos and dental preparations. In Mexico it is supposed to keep a lover's eye off others, and is considered a powerful protector in Haiti. During British colonial days in India, magistrates would have Hindu witnesses swear on this holy herb. It is recommended in Herbals for the relief of dysentery, gas pains, nausea, and as a cure for worms and warts.

The ancient Greeks and Romans thought basil would only grow if you screamed wild curses and shouted intelligibly while sowing the seeds. They also believed if you left a basil leaf under a pot, it would turn into a scorpion. Many believed that even smelling the leaves would cause scorpions to grow in the brain! Salome hid John the Baptist's head in a pot of basil to cover up the odor of its decomposition. In Italy, basil has always been a token of love.

In Romania, when a boy accepts a sprig of basil from his girl, he is engaged.

In India the Basil plant is sacred to both Krishna and Vishnu, and is cherished in every Hindu house. Every good Hindu goes to his rest with a Basil leaf on his breast. This is his passport to Paradise.

Basil name comes from the Greek for "King," and it is revered as a sacred herb in the Hindu religion. In Europe during the Middle Ages it was believed that scorpions bred under pots of Basil and that just smelling Basil would breed a scorpion in your brain!

Basil has a strong fresh pungent fragrance with a hint of pepper. The pungent aroma of Basil repels many flying insects. It's a good idea to have either a pot or a vase of cut stems on the table when eating outdoors.

Basil is a low-growing annual. It has light green silky leaves and tastes somewhat like cloves, with a strong, pungent, sweet smell. Basil is very sensitive to cold.

The word basil (fr. Gk basileus, king) means "royal". The Oxford English Dictionary quotes speculations that basil may have been used in "some royal unguent, bath, or medicine".

The most commonly used basil varieties are sweet basil and Thai basil. Other varieties include Purple Ruffles, Mammoth, Cinnamon, Lemon, Globe, and African Blue.

Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*, Lamiaceae) is also known as Albahaca, St. Joseph's Wort, and Sweet Basil. It is a tender annual herb.

Holy basil (*Ocimum sanctum* = *O. tenuiflorum*) is a sacred herb in India but is not much used for culinary purposes there. Known as Tulasi, the plant is worshipped as dear to Vishnu in some sects of Vaishnavism. A tea made from the leaves is used as a remedy for cold in India. Also known as Thai basil, it is a very common ingredient in Thai cuisine with a strong flavor similar to aniseed, which used to flavor curries and stir-fries.

Basil as an herb

The fresh herb can be kept for a short time in plastic bags in the refrigerator, or for a longer period in the freezer, after being blanched quickly in boiling water. Place fresh leaves in a dry jar with a pinch of salt, and cover with olive oil. The dried herb tastes utterly different, rather like curry. Mediterranean cuisines frequently use basil, especially combined with tomato. Basil, often the 'Genovese' variety, is one of the main ingredients in pesto - an Italian sauce from the city of Genoa.

There are several varieties of basil grown in many regions of Asia. Most of the Asian basils have a clove-like flavor that is generally stronger than that of the Western basils. For example, Chinese Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) is the same species of plant as its European counterpart. However they just taste a little differently.

Basils are very popular in Thai cuisine. Vietnamese and Chinese also use fresh or dried basils in soups and other foods. In Taiwan, people add fresh basil leaves to thick soups. They also eat fried chicken with deep fried basil leaves.

Some culinary writers have opined that basil is the "king of herbs".

Cultural aspects

The name basil may derive from the basilisk (also fr. Gk basileus), a legendary monster, because the plant was said to be a cure for its poison. Indeed, A Modern Herbal, by Mrs. M. Grieve, tells us: "The seeds have been reckoned efficacious against the poison of serpents..."

The plant has frequently been considered poisonous itself, while African legend claims it protects against scorpions. European lore sometimes claims that basil is a symbol of Satan, though in other places, like India, the plant is highly revered. Similarly, it is a symbol of love in present-day Italy, but represented hatred in ancient Greece.

Traditionally, the herb has been used in cooking as flavouring. However, it is also used for medicinal purposes, occasionally for helping with mild nervous disorders and rheumatic pain. The dried leaves are also said to be a cure for nervous headaches. It can also be infused in boiling water and is said to be good for all obstructions of the internal organs, and stops vomiting and nausea.

As a plant it is known for its rich, spicy and mild peppery flavour. It is part of the mint plant family which is why it has a hint of mint and clove flavour in it. There are over 40 known varieties of basil including some very unusual ones which have flavours including cinnamon, lemon and anise. The most common type of basil is the Sweet Basil also known as '*Ocimum Basilicum*' (the Greek term meaning 'to be fragrant'). The fragrant oils can decrease if too much fertiliser is used!! It grows best in warm tropical climates such as in Asia and India and is a perennial plant. In terms of cuisine, it is a herb that is traditionally used in Italian, Mediterranean and Thai cooking.

Basil can also be preserved by freezing in ice cubes. I prefer to chop the herb and then I spread it out on a flat dish ready for the freezer. Once it has frozen a little bit, I scoop it up and put into little boxes or plastic bags and put into the freezer. This procedure allows the herb to remain separate rather than forming into frozen lumps.

Basil is most commonly known for being an important ingredient of Pesto and as such is well suited to garlic, vinegar, olive oil and pine nuts. I love pesto sauce and when I rarely eat pasta, I love creamy pesto sauce as an accompaniment. It is an extremely versatile herb and can be added to meat and poultry as well as fish, tomatoes, rice, cheese and eggs. It also adds a special something to vegetables (especially root vegetables) and to soups and sauces.

Basil is planted on graves in both Persia and Malaysia and Egyptian women are known for scatter basil leaves on the resting places of their loved ones.

However, in ancient Greece, basil represented hate and misfortune and they associated poverty with a ragged woman with basil beside her, believing that the plant would not grow unless it was abused at the time it was sowed. The Romans also believed that the more abuse poured on the plant, the more prosperous a person would become.

Those of the medical profession in the olden days had conflicting opinions, some saying that it was poisonous and others saying that it had some medicinal value and was precious.

In Moldavia, it was regarded as a symbol of love and any man that accepted a sprig of basil from a woman would be smitten by her love.

In Crete it symbolised 'love washed with tears,' and in some parts of Italy it is considered to be a love-token.

In Tudor days, little pots of Basil were often given as graceful compliments by farmers' wives to visitors.

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