

Tale from the Garden!

This Sunday marks the second Sunday of Advent, which means that the holiday season is in full swing in most of the Western world. Advent is a time of waiting, hoping, and anticipating - though proper observation of it can become forgotten among the hustle of the season. We have to remember to strike a balance between quietly and reflectively anticipating Christmas and gaily enjoying all the frivolity that Christmas brings. The holiday season is a rather plant-friendly season. We sing of 'The Holly and the Ivy', shop for Firs, hang Mistletoe, reflect upon the gifts of Frankincense and Myrrh, bake with ginger, cinnamon and nutmeg. They all have their own special meanings. Most of us are at least slightly familiar with their origins and how they pertain to Christmas. But did you know that Advent has its own set of special plants, too?

Plants and herbs hold special symbolism in most religious traditions throughout the world, Advent is no different. In fact, these plants are supposed to be a part of every Advent wreath. You'll be surprised to find that the herbs of advent are really rather common.

Most of the herbs of advent are quite similar to the witnesses of the Nativity. Common, lowly, perhaps even unwanted. Yet they served a great purpose, and still lend us their subtle remedies.

Bedstraw - The frothy, yellow flowers of Lady's bedstraw (*Galium Verum*) scent the air of our grasslands, chalk downlands, meadows, heaths and sand dunes with honey. The stems can be so dense with flowers that they carpet the grass with yellow from June to September. Dried, this flower has the scent of new-mown hay, and its name is probably derived from the tradition of stuffing straw mattresses with it, particularly those of women about to give birth because of its sedative effect.



Before the advent of the modern mattress, lady's bedstraw was a popular choice for bedding thanks to its soft and springy quality and pleasant scent (when dried it smells of hay). It also has an astringent quality which may also have brought it into the bed against fleas. According to one medieval legend, the Virgin Mary Herself gave birth whilst lying on a bed of lady's bedstraw and bracken. The bracken refused to acknowledge the baby Jesus and in doing so lost its flower. Lady's bedstraw, however, bloomed in recognition. As it did so its flowers changed from white to gold.

Juniper - The association of juniper with Christmas stems from its role in the story of how the Holy Family fled King Herod to Bethlehem; as they ran through low fields with nowhere to hide, a juniper bush opened its branches to enclose them and Herod's soldiers could not see them through the spiky exterior so they passed by. The story goes that Mary blessed the juniper bush in gratitude, and Joseph soothed their frightened donkey by wiping its sweat away with one of its branches. Thus, the juniper has become a Christian symbol for protection.



This story has borne rural Christmas customs, such as farmers hanging juniper boughs or wreaths on their stable and barn doors. Juniper is also used as an indoor Christmas tree. Historically, juniper's status as a holy tree led to people at Christmas using the smoke of burning branches to purify their homes; the fragrant white smoke was also used as incense in churches. This sweet scent (or incense) has been used since then to symbolize the prayers of the faithful and the protection of God. Juniper in the Advent wreath represents immortality. Juniper grows and produces fruit all year round, which it probably why it was chosen to symbolize the immortal soul.

Rosemary - This fragrant herb is native to the hills of Palestine and Syria. It has been used since the dawn of civilization for washing and cleansing so it is no surprise to find it symbolizes "purity and virtue" in the Advent herbs. Known in the Holy Land as "Dew of the Sea", ancients often wore sprigs of

rosemary around their heads to improve their memory. If only that were true! Legend has it that rosemary will not grow taller than Jesus when he was on earth - 6 feet - or live longer than his 33 years.



Tradition says that the flowers of rosemary were once white. In the flight to Egypt, the Holy Family stopped briefly to rest. Mary threw her blue cloak on a rosemary bush, which ever after produced sky blue flowers. Rosemary is also the herb of remembrance and symbolizes the joyful memory of the birth of Jesus & the love we're to have of the Nativity story.

Lavender - Not only does lavender smell and look beautiful, but it's therapeutic, too! Lavender flowers are comprised of multiple purple florets on long narrow stems, spiking above the foliage. If you've ever looked out over a lavender field, you know the hypnotizing elegance that these types of flowers have. The scent of lavender (*Lavandula sp.*) has always been associated with washing and cleanliness.



Tradition says that Mary used a lavender bush to drape the baby Jesus' swaddling clothes on, after they had been washed. Ever since then, lavender has sported blue flowers, symbolic of heaven and the virgin birth. It is soothing, calming, and often used to encourage sleep and relieve anxiety. Just like a mother does. Lavender represents virtue and purity, and is a symbol of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Sage – 'Salvia officinalis' is an aromatic, rather woody perennial shrub in the mint family (Lamiaceae) native to the shores of the northern Mediterranean. Its common names include culinary sage, common garden sage, or garden sage. The word "sage" has come to mean "wise" or "a wise or learned person", hence its association with the Three Wise Men. It's scientific name, Salvia, means "to be in good health", "to save", or "salvation" while 'officinalis' is an old reference to a herb store, pharmacy, or drugstore. Sage was a sacred ceremonial herb of the Romans. It has been cultivated for both culinary and medicinal purposes for many centuries in Europe. Sage boasts more therapeutic & curative actions than many herbs & hence is the one used by medicinal herbalists and doctors as the official herb for medicine. It is believed that the Blessed Virgin hid behind it when fleeing to Egypt, and only after that did it possess such healing powers.



Sage also mitigates sorrow. Symbolically it means "I will suffer for all of you." It is included as a manger herb as it foreshadows the sacrificial death of Jesus. But after death comes life - immortality. "How can a man grow old who has sage in his garden?" is an ancient proverb much quoted in China.

Thyme - Several species of thyme grow in the hills of Greece. Ancient Greeks, liking the fragrance, used thyme freely, especially as an important ingredient in incense. The name 'thyme' is derived from the Greek word for incense (thymiama), the word for incense burner (thymiaterion), a word for a perfume (thuo), and/or the word for courage/bravery (thymos or thumus). Certainly the Greeks (and cultures after them) associated thyme with courage. Athletes applied thyme or oil of thyme to their

bodies to enhance their courage. It has an interesting way of being calming, but also a stimulant - perhaps to calm the nerves before being brave!



It is no wonder, therefore, that thyme (the symbol of bravery, courage, and endurance; three traits Jesus would need in his life) were said to be placed in the manger for the infant to sleep upon. What this herb represents make it a fitting plant for a child who would one day have to suffer for the sins of all.

Horehound - Horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*) is a European native of the Lamiaceae or mint family. The common name 'horehound' comes from the Old English words 'har' and 'hune', meaning downy plant. This descriptive name refers to the white hairs that give this herb its distinctive hoary appearance. Another suggested derivation is from the name of the Egyptian god of sky and light, Horus. Horehound is one of the oldest known cough remedies. It was one of the herbs in the medicine chests of the Egyptian pharaohs. In Roman times, Caesar's antidote for poison included horehound. The generic name is believed to be derived from the Hebrew word 'marrob', meaning bitter juice. Horehound is one of the bitter herbs used in the Jewish Passover rites - horse radish, chicory, endive, lettuce, horehound - to remind them of the bitterness of slavery in Egypt. Throughout its long history, white horehound has been valued not only as a folk remedy for coughs, colds and congested lungs, but also as a magic herb for protection against the spells attributed to witches! No wonder then, that the horehound is a bitter herb symbolic of good health.



Horehound was present in the manger to foretell the coming sorrow and betrayal of both mother and child.

Rue – Rue is called the "Herb of Grace" or the "Herb of Repentance". Rue is heavily scented, with bitter tasting leaves widely regarded as a medicinal cure-all. It does, in fact, ward off illness and infection as an antimicrobial and anti-bacterial herb. Rue is one of the plants mentioned by Jesus in his rebuke of the Pharisees. It is native to the Mediterranean region and common in many areas of Palestine.



Legend designates rue as one of the manger herbs, for its longstanding reputation for banishing all evil. In Christian and Jewish tradition rue (*Ruta graveolens*) symbolizes sorrow, clear vision, and true repentance. Branches of rue were used to sprinkle holy water to illustrate God's grace in salvation. Tradition says rue protects against the Devil and can be used as an antidote against poison.

Pennyroyal - Pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegium*) symbolizes wisdom and is native to the Holy Lands and also is one of the sweet manger herbs. It has bright green leaves with a pleasant though pungent aroma. It is used to repel mosquitoes and fleas and the flowers attract bees. It has long been used as a purifying herb, especially for purifying water. Legend is that the Pennyroyal bloomed at midnight on Christmas Eve in Christ's honour.



Its symbolic meaning is “escape, flee,” which is exactly what Joseph and Mary did after the Three Wise Men visited the baby Jesus and warned them of King Herod’s wicked intent.

Whether you celebrate Advent or go straight into Christmas (or both!), perhaps consider adding these plants to your décor (or maybe making some tea with some of these herbs!). They all mix very well together. Take the time to learn the significance of these plants in our holiday traditions. The real beauty of a herbal Advent wreath lies in the association the plants have with the inspiring stories of the Bible, and especially the Nativity story. Enjoy this special season!