

A selection of herbs used in medieval times

Anise (*Pimpinella anisum*), a licorice scented ferny annual. The seeds were used to treat gas and to induce sweating, as well as in sweets and candies.

Balm, Lemon, aka Melissa (*Melissa officinalis*), a lemon scented spreading perennial. A food, a furniture polish, and as a charm for bees and an aid against melancholy.

Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*), a fleshy-leaved perennial. Used in cooking-- for potage or boiled greens, in green pickles.

Calamus, aka Sweet Flag (*Acorus Calamus*), the rushes of sweet flag were strewn on the floors of medieval houses; the roots were dried and ground for use in body powders.

Cinnamon (*Cinnamomum zeylanicum*), the bark of an Asian tree. Used in cooking, including soups and meats as well as candies and cookies.

Cloves (*Syzygium aromaticum*), the fruits of a tropical tree. Used in cooking and as an antiseptic and painkiller.

Coriander (*Coriandrum sativum*), a fringy annual. The seeds were used for cooking and to deter fevers.

Chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*, or *Anthemis nobilis*; German chamomile *Matricaria chamomilla*): a short, creeping fringy annual with daisylike flowers. Used in handwashing waters and for headaches. Lawns and garden seats were planted with chamomile, for it 'smells the sweeter for being trodden on'.

Cumin (*Cuminum cyminum*), the seed of an annual plant. Used in cooking and to treat gas.

Flax (*Linum usitatissimum*), the plants of flax make linen, and the seeds cooked in water made a laxative and invalid's porridge; a flax seed, placed in the eye, helped remove foreign bodies because of the mucilage it exudes.

Frankincense (*Boswellia Thurifera*), The resin from a tree. Used for incense and in medicine.

Ginger (*Zingiber officinale*), an Indian root plant. Used in food, including gingerbread, cakes, meats and sidedishes. Its warmth was used medicinally to treat stomach problems, and as a remedy for the plague.

Horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*), a woolly short perennial. Horehound cough syrups and drinks were prescribed for chesty and head-colds and coughs.

Lavender (*Lavendula officinalis*, *Lavendula vera*, *Lavendula spica*, *Lavendula stoechas*), the dried flowers of, were used in food, and in refreshing washes for headaches; a cap with lavender flowers quilted in it kept headaches at bay. Used extensively in baths, as a personal scent and as a moth repellent.

Marjoram (*Origanum maiorana*), a tender perennial used in cooking, in spiced wine (hypocras), in brewing beer, and in medicines to 'comfort' the stomach.

Mint (*Mentha* species), of all kinds were used in food and medicine. Mint vinegar was used as a mouthwash; mint sauce restored the appetite. Used for all stomach ailments and in treating venom and wounds.

Mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*), a weedy perennial. A charm for travelers and used in foot ointments; also used in treating women's ailments.

Mustard (*Brassica nigra*, and *Sinapis alba*), a huge annual with tiny yellow or black seeds. Used to make sauces.

Myrrh (*Commiphora myrrha*), a tree gum. Used as an antiseptic on wounds.

Nutmeg (*Myristica fragrans*), the nuts of an Asian tree. Ground and eaten to improve digestion; set in silver and carried as scented jewelry. Common in medieval cookery

Pepper (*Piper nigrum*), small hard fruits of an Asian plant. Used extensively as a seasoning.

Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*): a shrubby tender perennial with pine-scented leaves, symbolic of wisdom and faithfulness. The flowers, boiled in tea, were an all-purpose medicine; the leaves boiled in white wine made a face wash. Putting the leaves under your pillow guarded against nightmares. The ashes of the wood, burnt, were used for cleaning teeth. Brides and grooms exchanged rosemary wreaths instead of rings; rosemary was also planted or strewn on graves. Rosemary was burned as an incense to kill or prevent infection, including the plague. Rosemary is said to have blue flowers because the Virgin dried her cloak on it on the way to Egypt.

Rue (*Ruta graveolens*), a sour-smelling perennial with rounded leaves, also called 'the herb of grace' because it was used as a holy water sprinkler. Used to treat venomous bites, and poor eyesight.

Saffron (*Crocus sativus*), the inner parts of a kind of crocus flower. Used in cooking, especially soups and grains, and to dye yellow; also used to treat infections.

Sage (*Salvia officinalis*), a green woody perennial, symbolic of age and wisdom. The leaves were used in salads and green sauces and as a spring tonic. "A man shall live for aye who eats sage in May." 'Cleans out' the system.

Thyme (*Thymus* species), a low, creeping perennial with tiny leaves, symbolic of courage. Used in cooking, and in baths and as an astringent. Burned as to fumigate against infection and to scent sacrifices.

Yarrow, or Achillea (*Achillea millefolium*), a fringey perennial with many-parted flowers. Used to treat headaches and wounds, especially battle wounds, and the bite of mad dogs.

Further Reading:

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Hildegard von Bingen's *Physica*. trans. by Pricilla Throop. (Healing Arts Press, 1998)

Markham, Gervase. *The English Housewife*. (McGill-Queens University Press, 1986)

The Medieval Health Handbook [Tacuinum Sanitatis]. (George Braziller, 1976)

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