

Rue



Ruta graveolens

Photo: Chausinho 3/25/08

Botanical Description

Rue is a sub-shrub that flowers in the summer. It has strong smelling leaves that have a bitter taste and are 1.5 to 4 inches in length. The plant can reach a height of 12 to 30 inches. From June to September it blossoms with greenish-yellow flowers. The whole plant can be used either fresh or dried. It contains an oil that is made up of many acids and can be extracted from the fresh herb.ⁱ The volatile oil is made up of 2-nonanone, 2-undecanone, linalyl acetate, 1,8-cineole and menthol.ⁱⁱ

Cultivation

The seeds can be planted in spring. When the seedlings reach a height of approximately two inches they should be transplanted about 18 inches from each other in new soil. They thrive in sheltered, well-drained soil. Since they grow low to the ground they can stand up to frost and can be left alone in the winter.ⁱ

Origin

Rue is derived from the Greek *reuo* meaning “to set free” for its highly useful nature in various ailments and diseases.ⁱ

History

In the first century B.C., King Mithradates of Asia Minor consumed rue in expanding doses over time as an immunity defense against poison.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Romans were the first to introduce rue to the British. It was then widely used as a garden herb and also in wild form in the hillsides of Lancashire and Yorkshire. Its existence dates back to the sixteenth century as mentioned in William Turner’s *Herbal* of 1562 for its medicinal uses. The Ancient Greeks used it as a remedy for nervousness and in the Middle Ages, many Europeans used in spells to ward off witches.ⁱ

At one time the holy water was sprinkled from brushes made of rue at the ceremony usually preceding the Sunday celebration of High Mass, for which reason it is supposed it was named the Herb of Repentance and the Herb of Grace. 'There's rue for you and here's some for me; we may call it herb of grace o' Sundays.'ⁱⁱ

Uses

Culinary

Since rue has a bitter taste, it was not a common herb in cooking, yet it was sometimes used in the Middle Ages as a flavoring in salads and omelets, and also in wines and beers.^{iv}

In *The New-England Cookery* of 1808, Lucy Emerson offers a recipe for Saragossa Wine with rue as one of the flavoring agents. Lucy Emerson was from Montpelier, Vermont and her collections of recipes included various dressings, puddings, preserves, beverages and other New England dishes. To make Saragossa Wine she advises placing one sprig of rue to every quart of water in addition to a handful of tennel roots to every gallon of water. She then proceeds to explain the process of boiling the water for a half an hour, simultaneously straining particles that surface. The liquid will form into a liquor. She then recommends bringing the liquid to a boil again for two hours after adding three pounds of honey. Once completely cooked and cooled, the liquid is to be kept in vessels of bottles for up to a year.^v

Medicinal

In the Middle Ages, rue was used to ward off disease, insects, witches and other contagions. As a warder of evils, judges would place sprigs of the herb on the bench in court in order to prevent infection of evil from criminals on trial.ⁱ In other forms, the root of the herb soaked in vinegar or the bruised leaves were also used to cure headaches, poisoning from snakebites, and to cure upset stomachs and flatulence.^{iv} Rue was also used in ales to improve vision. Pliny notes rue's effectiveness in preserving vision. Thus, many famous painters who valued clarity and sharpness especially in Italy followed the advice of Pliny.ⁱ

ⁱ Grieve, M. "A Modern Herbal-Rue." Botanical.Com-a Modern Herbal. 11 Mar. 2008 <<http://botanical.com/botanical/mgmh/r/rue---20.html>>.

ⁱⁱ PDR for Herbal Medicines. Montvale, NJ: Medical Economics Company, 1998. 1108-1109.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kowalchik, Claire & Hylton, William H. (1987). Rue. In *Rodale's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Herbs* (p. 433). Washington D.C: Rodale Press, Inc.

^{iv} Freeman, Margaret B. *Herbs for the Medieval Household*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art: New York, 1943.

^v Emerson, Lucy. "The New-England Cookery." *The Historic American Cookbook Project* 13 March 2008
<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/cookbooks/html/books/book_04.cfm>.