

Sage



Salvia officinalis

Garden Sage, Red Sage, *Salvia salvatrix*

Photo: LuvlyMikimoto 9/1/07

Botanical Description

Salvia officinalis can be used for both culinary and medical needs.

Sage generally grows to be approximately a foot tall with leaves one and a half to two inches long. The leaves grow in pairs on the thin stems. Over time the plant eventually becomes woody and much like a shrubbery. All parts of the plant have a strong scent due to the essential oils within them.¹ The essential oil is made up of thujone, 1,8-cineole, camphor, borneol, isobutyl acetate, camphene, linalool, alpha- and beta-pinene, viridiflorol, alpa- and beta-caryphyllene.

Sage blossoms in August. The flowers are labiate (lip-like) with a light purple, white, or pink color.²

Cultivation

Sage grows well in almost all types of garden soil. It thrives in partial shade and warm, dryer soil. Though sage is a perennial, it usually needs to be replanted every few years due to the thinning of the plant.³

Origins

The name scientific classification, *salvia officinalis* comes from the Latin verb *salvare* meaning to save. It was valued for its healing attributes as illustrated in a common Latin translation, “How can a man die who has Sage in his garden?” Some claim that the Virgin Mary used sage’s “extraordinary virtues” to guide her to Egypt and seek shelter.⁴

History

The Ancients and Arabians considered sage linked to immortality. It was first found northern Mediterranean countries and eventually spread to England, France and Switzerland in the fourteenth century. In the Middle Ages the herb was used in chicken and pig dishes as a sauce seasoning. The Greeks and Romans used it to flavor meats. The use of the herb dates to Chaucer and to Medieval times. It was used by elegant women in the fourteenth-century at dinner parties. When washing hands at the table, a water infused with sage leaves would be prepared and offered to the attendees to cleanse themselves.⁴

In China, as a counteracting agent to snake bites, many used it in teas and its use was more popular than green tea consumption. American Indians also used sage as a medicine mixed with bear grease to treat skin sores. In the 1800s, Americans used sage too to cure warts.⁵

Miller, Amy Bess. *Shaker Herbs: A History and a Compendium*. General Publishing Company Limited: New York, 1976, 90.

Uses

Medicinal

The whole herb is used for medicinal and culinary purposes. The leaves are the part of the plant most commonly used. For a sore throat the leaves can steep in hot water then the water can be gargled to soothe the throat. A infusion using the leaves can be made to soothe skin irritation, clear sinuses, or prevent an excess flow of saliva. The recipe is listed below:

The infusion when made for *internal* use is termed Sage Tea, and can be made simply by pouring 1 pint of boiling water on to 1 OZ. of the dried herb, the dose being from a wineglassful to half a teacupful, as often as required, but the old-fashioned way of making it is more elaborate and the result is a pleasant drink, cooling in fevers, and also a cleanser and purifier of the blood. Half an ounce of fresh sage leaves, 1 OZ. of sugar, the juice of 1 lemon, or 1/4 OZ. of grated rind, are infused in a quart of boiling water and strained off after half an hour.”³

Culinary

In cooking, sage was primarily used as a flavoring to enhance the taste of pork, lamb, meats, sausages, and in stuffing. It was also used raw in salads, pickles and

cheeses.³ In *Directions for Cookery, in its Various Branches*, Eliza Leslie offers a recipe for sausage. Miss Leslie's cookbook was considered one of the most well-known 19th century cookbooks first published in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1837. In the straightforward description, Leslie explains the sausage preparation process.⁶ With six pounds of lean pork plus three pounds of fat, she encourages the reader to "take some dried sage, pick off the leaves and rub them to powder, allowing three tea-spoonfuls to each pound of meat"⁶ After seasoning the mixture with salt and pepper, she tells the reader to put the meat mixture into a packed and covered stone jar and set it in a cool place. When ready to fry, the sausage is to be formed into cakes and fried in butter atop a slow fire. She notes that this type of sausage is primarily eaten at breakfast. Sage is the main flavoring ingredient in the dish.

Sage was one of the most abundant culinary herbs in Maine as revealed in Elder Otis Sawyer's journal: "March 6, 1873 Brother William Dumont went to the depot in the afternoon with four barrels of sage for Thompson and Leighton of Portland".⁷ The pulverized sage in these Shaker communities were often sold for two dollars for a dozen of large canisters and one dollar for a dozen of small ones. Sage seeds were also prosperous in various Shaker communities in New York and Massachusetts.⁷

Sage was also used often in conjunction with salt and pepper as a flavoring ingredient in various poultry stuffing recipes. A noted contributor to the history of food in 1827, Rufus Estes of Chicago offered various recipes representing a collection recipes covering a wide span of time in *Good Things to Eat as Suggested by Rufus* In the recipe, "Stuffing for fowls," Estes tells the reader to trim the crusts off two pounds of bread and place them in cold water to soak for five minutes. Then, dry the bread and cut it into small squares. Then, powdered sage and salt and pepper are added. Finally, butter plus a beaten egg and water are added over the mixture. After ten minutes of soaking, the stuffing is ready to serve.⁸

¹ Sloat, Caroline. *A Growing Collection*. Old Sturbridge Village. 17 February 2008. <http://www.osv.org/explore_learn/document_viewer.php?DocID=1030>

² PDR for Herbal Medicines. Montvale, NJ: Medical Economics Company, 1998. 1113-1114.

³ Grieve, M. "A Modern Herbal-Sages." *A Modern Herbal*. 17 Feb. 2008 <<http://botanical.com/botanical/mgmh/s/sages-05.html#commed>>.

⁴ Krutch, Joseph Wood, Herbal. G.P. Putnam's Sons: New York, 1965, 222)

⁵ Kowalchik, Claire & Hylton, William H. (1987). Sage. In *Rodale's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Herbs* (p. 439). Washington D.C: Rodale Press, Inc

⁶ Leslie, Eliza. "Directions for Cookery." The Historic American Cookbook Project 17 Feb 2008 <http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/cookbooks/html/books/book_12.cfm>.

⁷ Miller, Amy Bess. *Shaker Herbs: A History and a Compendium*. General Publishing Company Limited: New York, 1976, 90.

⁸ Estes, Rufus. "Good things to Eat as Suggested by Rufus." *The Historic American Cookbook Project* 17 Feb 2008 <<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects>>