

Costmary



Tanacetum balsamita

Photo: Stanislav Doronenko, wikipedia

Description

Costmary is an herb known most for its balsamic/minty smell and astringent taste. The essential oil found in the plant is used most often in cooking. Recent studies report that the essential oil accumulates the most during bud formation.¹ The essential oil was dominated by the two compounds, Carvone and beta-thujone.² Beta-thujone is a toxic ketone which is best known for its presence in absinthe.

The stems are wiry and can grow up to two to three feet. Leaves are feathery and long. Small yellow flowers bloom in August but do not seed in the US. The roots are creeping, so the plant easily spreads on its own.¹

Cultivation

Costmary can grow in almost any area, but thrives in dry soil. Separation or planting is best done in early spring or late autumn by dividing the roots. Plant approximately two feet apart. If planted in the shade leaves will grow, but the plant will not flower.¹

Origin

Costmary comes from the Latin word, *costus*, a root commonly used as a spice and preserve, and also from “Mary” in reference to the Virgin Mary. It was often referred to as the “Herbe Sainte-Marie” in France during the Middle Ages.¹

History

Costmary is an old English herb similar to Tansy. It was popular in various gardens in southern Europe as well as England in the sixteenth century. During the late eighteenth century, the leaves were a common condiment in France. In the United States, in the late nineteenth century, it was a flavoring agent in ales and beers.¹

Uses

Culinary

The fresh leaves of the herb are commonly used in salads. The dried leaves are used in potpourris for their sweet attractive scents.¹

Medicinal

A boiling of the herb in olive oil with Adder's Tongue and a thickening agent was used as an ointment to cure sores on the skin.¹

¹ Grieve, M. "A Modern Herbal-Costmary." A Modern Herbal. 2 Mar. 2008
<<http://botanical.com/botanical/mgmh/s/costmary-05.html#commed>>.

² Bylaite, E., et al. "Composition of Essential Oil of Costmary [Balsamita Major (L.) Desf.] at Different Growth Phases." Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry 48.6 (2000): 2409-14.