

HERBS AND HERBALISM

Two Folk Medicinals

by Dan Salzler

ARTEMISIA ABSINTHIUM

As a medicinal herb that has a history from the time of Dioscorides, Wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*) has maintained its place in the herb garden and in the home.

Wormwood has been used for centuries as a major ingredient of aperitifs and herb wines. Absinthe (not legal in the United States) and vermouth obtain their names from this plant via 18th century French variations of the German word Wermut.

Wormwood contains at least one substance which can be very dangerous to the consumer if taken in excess. Santonin, a constituent of the herb, is a hallucinogen, which, when taken in combination with alcoholic drinks, is very dangerous.

A perennial herb, artemisia grows to a height of two to four feet. Its stem and leaves are covered in thick, downy hair, giving the plant a silvery appearance. In late summer it produces small, very aromatic flowers with grayish bracts.

The plant prefers a well-drained, neutral pH soil in full sun to light shade. It may be propagated by seeds, which are very slow to germinate, by summer growth cuttings, or by root divisions taken in the early spring.

The medicinal portions of the plant are the flower tops and the leaves. Uses include applications of the herb as an anthelmintic (expels worms), antiseptic, stomachic, and antipyretic (prevents or reduces fevers). Its oil, applied topically is said to serve as a local anesthetic against the pain of bites, stings, rheumatism and arthritis. Wormwood is in a variety of liniments and those popular beverages (taken for medicinal reasons only!) vermouth and absinthe

Wormwood, also known as Old Man Wormwood, is a handsome addition to any garden. If you grow it for no other reason, grow it for its property as an insect repellant.

Constituents of wormwood include: bitter and volatile oils which

stimulate secretions and promote appetite; a glucoside; resins and starch. Absinthin is water soluble component that will wash off the plant leaves and into the soil, inhibiting growth of certain other plants nearby.

Artemisia absinthium brings richness and history to the garden. Its beauty can only be surpassed, perhaps, by some of the artemisias. It deserves a special place in the garden for all who visit to enjoy.

CAPSICUM ANNUUM

Cayenne (*Capsicum annuum*), also known as red pepper, hot pepper and Chili pepper, is an perennial herb reputed to have several medicinal uses in addition to its culinary ones.

Appropriately, the word cayenne is derived from the Greek word meaning "to bite." It is a member of the pepper family and is native to Africa and India, where it grows as a perennial. It is not known how long cayenne has been cultivated in the west, but early writings reveal that the English were cultivating it as early as the 16th century. Today, the majority of cayenne that is consumed in culinary and medicinal forms comes from Mexico and South America.

The plant, when grown outside its tropical habitat, is considered an annual and will usually grow to a height of two to three feet. The plants must be started from seed, indoors or in a greenhouse long before setting out. Cayenne likes lots of intense light, warm temperatures, and moist soil.

The leaves are lanceolate to ovate, entire, and petioled. The drooping yellow to white flowers produce a long, skinny red fruit that is valued as a food and as a medicinal. The fruit ripens in late fall and contains seeds that are very hot to the taste.

When harvesting the pepper and working with the fruit for culinary or medicinal purposes, be sure to keep hands and fingers away from sensitive parts of the body (like your eyes!) as the oils of cayenne can be irritating to the skin and other tissues.

There are various historic medicinal uses for cayenne. The English combined it and slippery elm in equal parts for use in a beverage taken for constipation. This mixture did not function as a laxative, but served

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to strengthen the intestinal function. It has also been dissolved in warm water and used as a gargle for sore throats. Cayenne peppers rubbed on pulled or sore muscles served as a liniment, and cayenne powder sprinkled in shoes kept the feet warm in winter. Cayenne was said to strengthen the kidneys and, when used in combination with garlic, it was suggested that it would heal ulcers and lower blood pressure.

Cayenne contains capsinin, capsaicin, alkaloids, vitamin C, and palmitic acid.

Used medicinally as an aid to digestion or as a culinary condiment, cayenne has qualities worth leaving a place for it in the herb garden year after year.

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