

Basil

Botanical name: *Ocimum basilicum* Family: *Labiatae*

Basil is a very aromatic herb well known worldwide. There are several species and many varieties, but the best known is the sweet basil *Ocimum basilicum*. Although readily identified with Mediterranean cuisine, basil is a native of India spreading further to Southeast Asia. Basil is also widely used in Southeast Asian cuisine, but the Asian variety has a slightly different aroma.

Many folklores and superstitions surround the plant basil, yet they differ between various cultures. The ancient Greeks and Romans thought the herb was a symbol of malice and lunacy. They believed that in order to grow basil successfully, one had to yell and curse. Just think, in French, *semer le basilic* (sowing basil) also means 'ranting'.

Ancient Greek and Roman folklore has it that basil thrives on the brain of a murdered man. Many of us are familiar with Boccaccio's story 'Decameron', poeticized by John Keats in his poem 'Isabella and the Pot of Basil' and depicted in a painting by Holman Hunt. It tells the tale of a young woman whose family intend to marry her to some high noble, but who falls for Lorenzo, one of her brothers' employees. When the brothers learn of this, they murder poor Lorenzo. The distraught Isabella is visited in a dream by her beloved's ghost. She decides to exhume his body, then buries his head in a pot of basil and waters it with her tears while pining away. In the painting, Isabella is

shown standing protectively over a large china bowl which has basil growing out of the head of her beloved. This gives credence to the belief that basil thrives on the brain of a murdered man. Another superstition is that, because scorpions like to shelter in the shade of the basil bush, basil can cause scorpions to grow inside the head, a sprig left under a pot would hatch into a scorpion.

In other cultures, basil is associated with love rituals. In some parts of Italy, when a woman puts a pot of basil on her balcony, it means that she will be receptive to her lover. In Eastern Europe, it was assumed that a man would love the woman from whom he accepted a sprig of basil.

When two lovers place two basil leaves into a fire, if both leaves are immediately consumed, it means that the relationship will be harmonious. If the leaves pop and sizzle, there will be some disagreement, and if the leaves crackle and fly apart, the relationship is doomed. Back in its native land India, the Indian basil *O. sanctum* is sacred to the gods Vishnu and Krishna. As a custom, a sprig of this variety is put between the hands of the dead before burial to ensure their safe passage into the next world.

Mediterranean cuisine uses mainly the sweet basil *O. basilicum*. The Southeast Asian basil variety has slightly thinner leaves, with cinnamon/anise/liquorice-like fragrance and features in abundance in salads, stir fries and curries. Other species include *O. canum* or *O. citriodorum*, which has smaller hairy leaves and a pungent lemon scent – its seeds are used in desserts, drinks as well as herbal medicine; *O. sanctum*, known as sacred basil, which is usually planted around temples – its leaves are smaller and darker and its strong flavour complements dishes such as fish curries. In many Indian homes, a delicious brew of basil leaves, shredded ginger and sweetened with honey, is often served as a drink in winter. It is said to be a tonic.

Basil contains a small amount of volatile oil with different chemical compositions and flavour characteristics. The proportions of these chemicals vary depending on the variety. In Eastern herbal medicine, the whole plant is used, including roots and seeds.

Fact or Old wives' tale?: To treat a cough, eat rice with fresh basil leaves, fresh ginger and white pepper. To treat a cloudy cornea, drink a concoction of basil seeds slowly boiled in water before retiring every night. It is said to be effective with long term use.



Different sizes and shapes of basil leaves