

Christian symbolism in herbs - A brief look at Christian symbolism in some herbs

Angelica

There are many species but the most notable one is garden angelica (*A. Archangelica*), simply known as angelica. Its use as a healing plant pre-dates Christianity; European Christians gave angelica its official botanical name, *Angelica archangelica*. Perhaps the plant was originally intended to honour *all* the archangels but in fact it is the archangel Michael this plant was dedicated to.

In much of its native Europe, the plant is in bloom during St. Michael's official feast day (8 May). It is said that the angel presented it to mankind as a cure for the plague. 15th and 16th century herbalists recommended eating or chewing the roots as a cure for a number of diseases. Angelica also has a strong tradition as a protective herb against evil and witchcraft. Today it is used more as a flavouring, it is reputed to be one of the ingredients in the liqueur chartreuse. The yellowish green leaves are large and divided into 3 leaflets with toothed edges. Greenish white flowers bloom in umbrella like clusters at the ends of the tall, hollow, and stiff bloom stalks. The dried root of the species *Angelica sinensis* is commonly known as Chinese angelica or Chinese ginseng (dong quai)



Rosemary

Rosemary has long been associated with the Virgin Mary. Many legends surround this plant. One is that it had white flowers until Mary, fleeing to Egypt with the baby Christ, threw her robe over a rosemary bush while they had a rest beside it. The flowers then turned forever into the blue colour of her garment and the plant was referred to thereafter as the 'rose of Mary'. Another legend compares the growth of the plant to the height of the Saviour and declares that the rosemary bush will increase in breadth but will never grow taller than His height.

St. John's Wort

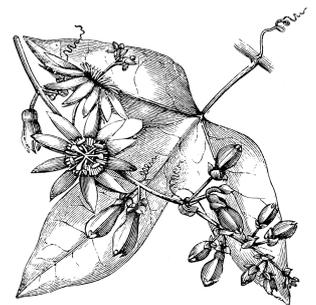
When the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem looked at the dotted leaves of St. John's wort, they saw symbols of puncture wounds. This - combined with the tendency of the flower petals to 'bleed' red oil when crushed - earned St. John's wort an honoured place in Christian herbalism. Named for

John the Baptist, St. John's wort is said to bloom on St. John's traditional birthday, June 24, and 'bleed' on August 24, the day the Saint was beheaded. St. John's wort was traditionally used as a medicinal herb to treat wounds and nervous complaints. However, it fell into disuse during the 19th century. Then in the 1980s it went into a revival after clinical trials demonstrated its effectiveness in relieving mild to moderate depression.



Passionflower

Despite its name, passionflower wasn't named for any aphrodisiac actions. Instead 'passion' refers to the 'passion' or 'suffering' of Christ. 17th century missionaries saw great symbolism in the flower's appearance and used it to illustrate the events in the last hours of the life of Christ. In the flower's three pistils, they saw the nails that held Christ to the cross and in the five stamens, the wounds He suffered. The ovary which is set on a stalk represents the sponge soaked in vinegar and offered on a stick, or the hammer used to drive in the nails; the spiky corona is the crown of thorns; the five sepals and five petals represent the ten apostles who didn't betray Christ and the vine's coiling tendrils were equated with the whips. Stretch your imagination further... the leaves are shaped like a three-fingered hand, symbolizing the Holy Trinity, and the egg-shaped fruit suggested 'rebirth' or 'renewal'. Even the color of the blossoms was significant. The deep, rich purple symbolized royalty while the stark white served as a reminder of Christ's purity.



Lady's Mantle

In the Middle Ages, this plant had been associated with the Virgin Mary (hence it is Lady's Mantle, not Ladies' Mantle) - the lobes of the leaves being supposed to resemble the scalloped edges of a mantle. Its scalloped leaves catch rain or dew drops, inspired poets and alchemists and were parts of many mystic potions. Medicinally, lady's mantle is classed as a woman's herb. It has been used most effectively in the treatment of painful periods, treatment before and after childbirth. Lady's Mantle is ideal for softening the edge of a shaded path or creating a groundcover in dappled shade. The plant also looks great in a vase and is a favourite with flower arrangers.

