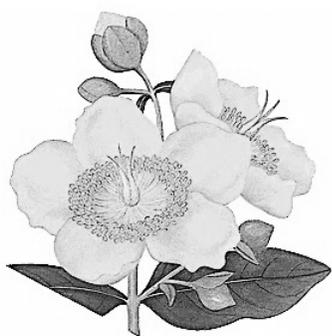


St. John's wort



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. Today, St. John's wort has become more popular than ever. In fact, it is one of the top-selling herbal medicines. Just pay a visit to some herbal health food store, you will notice that St. John's wort is available in many forms, from capsules to infusions, medicated oils, liquid tinctures, cream; and manufactured by just about every known pharmaceutical company. St. John's wort contains hypericin and hyperforin which have anti-depressant effects plus other antiviral compounds and immune-boosting flavonoids

which act against viral, bacterial and fungal infections. Overnight, this ancient herb became recognized as a potent antidepressant as well as a promoter of wound healing.

Native to Europe and western Asia, naturalized in North America, Australia and New Zealand, this woody perennial plant (the old English word 'wort' means plant) spreads invasively in meadows, hedgerows and roadsides. It is considered a troublesome weed, declared noxious in many countries, notably Australia. Early Christians named the plant after John the Baptist. It has yellow, five-petalled, gland-dotted flowers with masses of stamens at the centre. The leaves also contain oil glands resembling tiny perforations. When crushed, these glands release red oil like blood. This accounts for the plant's curious name; as legend has it that it arose from Saint John's blood after his beheading, in full bloom on the Saint's day (June 24th) and reputed to bleed on the anniversary of the Saint's beheading (August 29th). There are many old superstitions regarding this herb. The name 'hypericum' may have derived from the Greek *hyper* meaning above and *eikon* meaning picture, a reference to the popular practice of placing the plants above religious images to guard off evils. In pre Christian times, sprays of the plant were suspended over icons to sanctify the atmosphere. Later, Christians adopted this belief by burning the plant in bonfires on St. John's eve to drive away evil spirits and witches' spells.

There is a rhyme that illustrates the once popular belief about St. John's wort

*St. John's wort doth charm all witches away
If gathered at midnight on the Saint's holy day
Any devils and witches have no power to harm
Those that gathered the plant for a charm.
Rub the lintels with that red juicy flower
Nor thunder nor tempest will then have the power
To hurt or hinder your house, and bind
Round your neck a charm of a similar kind.*



The blood red infused oil (known as the 'blood of Christ') is prepared by steeping the flowers in cold-pressed olive, safflower or sunflower oil in the sun for a few weeks. This can be used for burns, inflammation of the skin, muscles and connective tissues and as an antiseptic on sores and ulcers. The aerial parts can be taken internally to lighten the mood and lift the spirits. They can also relieve a variety of nerve pains, such as sciatica and neuralgia. In recent times, researchers have been studying St. John's wort for the possible treatment of HIV infection, viral hepatitis and chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS).

Note: Combining herbs with certain drugs may alter their action and/or produce unwanted side effects. St. John's wort is known to interfere with a number of prescription medications.

Some well known species in the genus are *H. calycinum*, commonly known as Aaron's beard, or rose of Sharon, a low-growing evergreen shrub, good for ground covers in temperate climates and *H. androsaemum*, commonly known as tutsan, from the French *toutsain* meaning 'heal all', which was mentioned in Old Herbals as a treatment for injuries and inflammations.