

SAGE



Common sage (*Salvia Officinalis*) originated in the Mediterranean basin, like most of our culinary herbs, but is hardy enough to grow almost all over the world, both wild and as a garden plant. It has been valued for its medicinal properties since ancient times, and indeed its Latin name derives from the same root as 'salvation', since sage was considered able to save people from illness and death. It was also called 'herba sacra' - sacred herb - by the Romans.

Apart from its widespread use in cooking, flavouring cheeses, and, in the past, in brewing ales, it has always been used in the folk medicine of many countries in the form of infusions (teas), gargles, vinegars and poultices, particularly for mouth and throat infections, to heal wounds, and clear headaches. It is often described in old herbals as a mental stimulant. For example, John Gerarde says 'Sage is singularly good for the head and brain, it quickeneth the senses and memory.' Sage has a powerful action on the female reproductive system, and was among the simples used by village 'wise-women' (so many of whom were burnt during witch-hunts from the middle ages to the seventeenth century) to help women in

childbirth, to induce menstruation when it was late or scanty, or to normalise it during the menopause.

Many of the folk uses of Sage are thoroughly vindicated by experience and by scientific testing, but others belong to the area where folk medicine and folklore overlap. It may well be an antidote to snake-bites, but other claims, such as that where Sage grows abundantly in the garden, the wife rules the roost, or that if your garden sage collapses and dies your business will also collapse, can be regarded less seriously!

However, in spite of the undoubted value of Sage in the form of the fresh or dried plant, when we come to consider the essential oil, a great deal of caution is needed. The oil contains a high proportion of thujone (the principle constituent of oil of Thuja, from which it derives its name) which can provoke epileptic fits or convulsions, and, in larger amounts, is toxic to the central nervous system and capable of inducing paralysis.

The principle that a substance which in large doses can produce a symptom will cure that symptom when used in very small doses, on which homoeopathy is based, seems to enter into play when we consider Sage, since many of the mediaeval writers considered Sage a tonic for the nerves and a cure for palsy (paralysis), and the amount of thujone consumed when sage is taken as a tea is miniscule when compared to the concentration found in the essential oil. The same comparison can be made when we consider the action of Sage on the reproductive system, for a small amount is described as antispasmodic, but a larger amount has been known to induce violent uterine spasm. In terms of the essential oil, it is important to remember that a 'larger amount' may only be a very few drops.

It is important to be aware of the risk of poisoning with essential oil of Sage as has been shown in the case of a number of women who attempted self-treatment based on information in books. The symptoms and severity of their experiences ranged from feeling slightly faint and shaking, through to such violent abdominal pain that the victim was admitted to hospital for three days. The most common



experience, though, was moderate to severe uterine contractions and menstrual bleeding so excessive as to verge on haemorrhage. In every case except that of the girl who needed hospitalisation, the Sage oil was used externally only, either in a massage oil or in baths, and in amounts varying from 2 or 3 drops to about 10.



For these reasons, aromatherapists use the oil of Clary Sage (*Salvia Sclarea*) in preference to the common Sage, as it shares many of the therapeutic properties of Sage oil, but contains only a very small proportion of thujone.

The few uses to which essential oil of Sage can be safely put, are in gargles and mouthwashes, for which it is diluted in alcohol and water to a very low concentration, and just occasionally as a massage oil for men with a very developed musculature. Sage oil is very warming and penetrating to the muscles, and has a softening effect on muscles which have been perhaps overdeveloped by weight-training, or other sports involving short bursts of intensive effort. Even here, though, there are other choices, such as Lavender, Marjoram or Rosemary, which are generally preferable to Sage.

The character and properties of **CLARY SAGE** can be found under the entry for that oil.