

The History and Usage of Rosemary

By Olivia Letlow, HSABR Garden Intern, 2023

Rosmarinus officinalis, or rosemary, was the Herb Society of America's herb of the month for November 2023. A member of the mint family, it has global significance, and it is most notably native to the Mediterranean coastline. According to the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the scientific genus name, *Rosmarinus*, comes from the Latin words *ros* and *marinus*, which translates to “dew of the sea,” referring to the dew-like sea spray found on plants growing close to the water. It can also be traced back to ancient China in 220 CE, and in the ninth century, it reached the UK, contributing to its global popularity.

Rosemary is now cultivated worldwide. It is a generally hardy plant, and can tolerate cold temperatures down to 20°F. The thick, leathery leaves resemble needles, with dark green leaves with a pale underside. It grows small flower clusters that can be pale blue, pink, or white. Rosemary does best in full sun and well-drained soil. It can be harvested any time, and used in a variety of ways, including fresh or dried.

The use of this herb can be traced back to ancient Egypt under the rule of King Ramesses III. There are records of the king offering 125 measures of rosemary to the god Amon at Thebes. Ancient cuneiform stone tablets dating back to 5000 BC were found mentioning rosemary and it was later documented in Egyptian burial rituals, in traditional eastern medicine, and in western scholarly contexts.

Rosemary is also a popular Christmas plant. In Spain, they call it “romero,” meaning “pilgrim plant,” stemming from a biblical story about the Virgin Mary. It is said that during her flight to Egypt, she draped her blue cloak around the bush, and the flowers turned from white to blue. It is also said that a rosemary bush should never grow taller than Jesus Christ himself, and that if it reaches the age that he died at 33, it will lie down instead of growing straight up. Many legends tie the scent of rosemary to Christmas joy and remembrance of its humble service to the Holy Family. It was later called “Rose of Mary” and later “rosemary” in honor of the Virgin Mary.

Rosemary has a significant role in European folklore. In Sicily, Sicilians believed that the blooms were used by young fairies to sleep in. In Spain and Italy, it was used as a defense against witches and harmful hexes. The etymology of rosemary is heavily

tied to its history and symbolism too. In Portugal, rosemary is known as “elegirín,” which takes its roots from the word for “elfin plant” in Scandinavian.

There is heavy symbolism tied to this fragrant herb. Even since ancient times, rosemary has been thought to improve memory. It is also seen as a symbol of fidelity and remembrance of those who have passed away. In pre-industrial England, it was traditionally used to toss onto coffins at funerals to help cover up the smell of decay and death. However, this usage can be traced all the way back to ancient Egypt, where rosemary was used in the embalming process. Rosemary was also traditionally used at weddings, worn by brides as a symbol of happiness, loyalty, and love. In the Victorian era, brides carried sprigs of rosemary to symbolize carrying her memories of her old home to her new one. The Victorian meaning of rosemary was “your presence revives me,” most likely due to its notable fragrance. Rosemary has inspired many poetic works and is even mentioned in five of Shakespeare’s plays. In *Hamlet*, Ophelia states that rosemary is for remembrance, a symbol of death and mourning, which foreshadows her own death in the play.

In the early days of Greek and Roman society, scholars were often seen wearing rosemary garlands on their heads to improve their memory during exams. According to the National Library of Medicine, studies have proven that rosemary can have a strong impact on enhancing cognitive function for patients suffering from Alzheimer’s disease and mild cognitive impairment. It contains pharmacologically active components such as phenolic diterpenes, triterpenes, phenolic acids, such as carnosic acid, carnosol, rosmanol, ursolic acid, betulinic acid, and rosmarinic acid. The most effective compound present is the isolated phenolic compounds, which can interact with multiple molecular targets to improve mental cognition.

Whether fresh or dried, rosemary is used in a wide variety of ways. Besides its ornamental appeal, it can also be used for cosmetic, decorative, medicinal, and culinary usages. The herb is rich in aromatic oils that can be used in perfumes, soaps, and lotions. It can also be used as an astringent and cleanser in beauty and bath products. The Queen of Hungary was said to bathe in rosemary water every day to retain her youthful beauty. Rosemary can also be used to flavor foods such as fish, lamb, poultry, tomatoes, cheese, eggs, vegetables, and herbal butters.

In addition to these everyday uses, rosemary also has a historical usage in witchcraft. It was favored by wise women, later called witches, in Italy and Spain for its belief as a safeguard against witches. It was believed that keeping rosemary

flourishing the home denoted that a woman of power resided there. Unfortunately, this led to many men destroying the plants in their gardens to signify that they, not the women, are the heads of the households. Rosemary may have also been used in herbal sachets to protect against nightmares for children.

Medicinally, rosemary can help alleviate many human ailments. It has a warming, stimulating, and dispersal action in the body. It can improve blood circulation, which in turn can be beneficial to the heart, liver, nerves, lungs, and brain. It can also be used as a decongestant and has antimicrobial properties. Rosemary is especially good for the cardiovascular system, increasing circulation to the extremities of the body. It can strengthen fragile blood vessels, which helps with varicose veins. Rosemary may even have an effect on blood pressure issues and can be anti-inflammatory. With these circulation improvements, blood flow can help with immunity, mental health, and nervous system health. Rosemary oil may even be able to stimulate hair growth by improving blood flow and circulation to hair follicles in the head. Rosemary can be prepared in a number of ways. It can be used in teas, essential oils, and tinctures for medicinal usages. It is best used as whole leaf extract so that all of the benefits can be reaped.

Rosemary is a hearty herb that is easy to grow. It can grow to be large shrubs in warm climates and can overwinter in pots indoors. It can be found in nurseries or even grocery stores, and can be grown in a wide range of climates. Rosemary has been a cultural staple across the globe, with folklore that has surpassed history. The accessibility of rosemary makes it an extremely useful herb, often seen as a “cure all,” making it no wonder that rosemary has had such widespread usage for many centuries.

RESOURCES

“Every Rosemary Has a Story.” *The Present Tree*, thepresenttree.com/blogs/tree-meanings/every-rosemary-has-a-story.

Greenhouse, Mays. *Christmas Rosemary*, www.maysgreenhouse.net/mays_greenhouse_017.htm#:~:text=One%20is%20said%20that%20a,cloak%20over%20a%20rosemary%20bush. Accessed 30 Nov. 2023.

Hussain, S M, et al. “Cognition Enhancing Effect of Rosemary (Rosmarinus Officinalis L.) in Lab Animal Studies: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis.” *Brazilian Journal of Medical and Biological Research = Revista Brasileira de*

Pesquisas Medicas e Biologicas, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 9 Feb. 2022, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8851910/.

Oliveira, Jonatas Rafael de, et al. "Rosmarinus Officinalis L. (Rosemary) as Therapeutic and Prophylactic Agent - Journal of Biomedical Science." *BioMed Central*, 9 Jan. 2019, jbiomedsci.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12929-019-0499-8.

Quick Facts Rosemary - Herb Society, www.herbsociety.org/file_download/inline/824d2982-0b7c-40d9-b3d9-9e5d823d295c.

"Rosemary as a Symbol of Commemoration in Australia." *Anzac Portal*, corporateName=Department of Veterans' Affairs; Address=21 Genge St, Civic/Canberra City, ACT 2601; Contact=+61 2 6289 1133; Email=education@dva.Gov.Au, 17 Nov. 2022, anzacportal.dva.gov.au/commemoration/symbols/rosemary#:~:text=History%20of%20its%20symbolism,served%20and%20those%20who%20died.

"Rosemary, rosmarinus Officinalis." *Wisconsin Horticulture*, hort.extension.wisc.edu/articles/rosemary-rosmarinus-officinalis/.