

Mugwort

Botanical: *Artemisia vulgaris* (LINN.)

Family: N.O. Compositae

Synonyms

Felon Herb. St. John's Plant. Cingulum Sancti Johannis.

Parts Used

Leaves, root.

Mugwort abounds on hedgebanks and waysides in most parts of England. It is a tall-growing plant, the stems, which are angular and often of a purplish hue, frequently rising 3 feet or more in height. The leaves are smooth and of a dark green tint on the upper surface, but covered with a dense cottony down beneath; they are once or twice pinnately lobed, the segments being lanceshaped and pointed. The flowers are in small oval heads with cottony involucre and are arranged in long, terminal panicles; they are either reddish or pale yellow. The Mugwort is closely allied to the Common Wormwood, but may be readily distinguished by the leaves being white on the undersurfaces only and by the leaf segments being pointed, not blunt. It lacks the essential oil of the Wormwood.

The Mugwort is said to have derived its name from having been used to flavour drinks. It was, in common with other herbs, such as Ground Ivy, used to a great extent for flavouring beer before the introduction of hops. For this purpose, the plant was gathered when in flower and dried, the fresh herb being considered unsuitable for this object: malt liquor was then boiled with it so as to form a strong decoction, and the liquid thus prepared was added to the beer. Until recent years, it was still used in some parts of the country to flavour the table beer brewed by cottagers.

It has also been suggested that the name, Mugwort, may be derived not from 'mug,' the drinking vessel, but from *moughte* (a moth or maggot), because from the days of Dioscorides, the plant has been regarded, in common with Wormwood, as useful in keeping off the attacks of moths.

In the Middle Ages, the plant was known as *Cingulum Sancti Johannis*, it being believed that John the Baptist wore a girdle of it in the wilderness. There were many superstitions connected with it: it was believed to preserve the wayfarer from fatigue, sunstroke, wild beasts and evil spirits generally: a crown made from its sprays was worn on St. John's Eve to gain security from evil possession, and in Holland and Germany one of its names is St. John's Plant, because of the belief, that if gathered on St. John's Eve it gave protection against diseases and misfortunes.

Dr. John Hill extols its virtues, and says:

'Providence has placed it everywhere about our doors; so that reason and authority, as well as the notice of our senses, point it out for use: but chemistry has banished natural medicines.'

Dioscorides praises this herb, and orders the flowering tops to be used just before they bloom.

The dried leaves were, sixty or seventy years ago, in use by the working classes in Cornwall as one of the substitutes for tea, at a time when tea cost 7s. per lb., and on the Continent Mugwort is occasionally employed as an aromatic culinary herb, being one of the green herbs with which geese are often stuffed during roasting.

The downy leaves have been used in the preparation of *Moxas*, which the Japanese use to cure rheumatism. The down is separated by heating the leaves and afterwards rubbing them between the hands until the cottony fibres alone remain, these are then made up into small cones or cylinders for use. *Artemisia Moxa* and *A. sinensis* are mainly used in Japan. This cottony substance has also been used as a substitute for tinder.

Sheep are said to enjoy the herbage of the Mugwort, and also the roots. The plant may, perhaps, be the *Artemesia* of Pontos, which was celebrated among the ancients for fattening these animals. It is said to be good for poultry and turkeys.

A variegated variety of Mugwort also occurs.

Parts Used Medicinally

The leaves, collected in August and dried in the same manner as Wormwood, and the root, dug in autumn and dried. The roots are cleansed in cold water and then freed from rootlets. Drying may be done at first in the open air, spread thinly, as contact may turn the roots mouldy. Or they may be spread on clean floors, or on shelves, in a warm room for about ten days, and turned frequently. When somewhat shrunken, they must be finished more quickly by artificial heat in a drying room or shed, near a stove or gas fire, care being taken that the heated air can escape at the top of the room. Drying in an even temperature will probably take about a fortnight, or more. It is not complete until the roots are dry to the core and brittle, snapping when bent.

Mugwort root is generally about 8 inches long, woody, beset with numerous thin and tough rootlets, 2 to 4 inches long, and about 1/12 inch thick. It is light brown externally; internally whitish, with an angular wood and thick bark, showing five or six resin cells. The taste is sweetish and acrid.

Constituents

A volatile oil, an acrid resin and tannin.

Medicinal Action and Uses

It has stimulant and slightly tonic properties, and is of value as a nervine and emmenagogue, having also diuretic and diaphoretic action.

Its chief employment is as an emmenagogue, often in combination with Pennyroyal and Southernwood. It is also useful as a diaphoretic in the commencement of cold.

It is given in infusion, which should be prepared in a covered vessel, 1 OZ. of the herb to 1 pint of boiling water, and given in 1/2 teaspoonful doses, while warm. The infusion may be taken cold as a tonic, in similar doses, three times daily: it has a bitterish and aromatic taste.

As a nervine, Mugwort is valued in palsy, fits, epileptic and similar affections, being an old-fashioned popular remedy for epilepsy (especially in persons of a feeble constitution). Gerard says: 'Mugwort cureth the shakings of the joynts inclining to the Palsie;' and Parkinson considered it good against hysteria. A drachm of the powdered leaves, given four times a day, is stated by Withering to have cured a patient who had been affected with hysterical fits for many years, when all other remedies had failed.

The juice and an infusion of the herb were given for intermittent fevers and agues. The leaves used to be steeped in baths, to communicate an invigorating property to the water.

Preparations

Fluid extract, 1/2 to 1 drachm.

Culpepper directs that the tops of the plant are to be used fresh gathered, and says:

'a very slight infusion is excellent for all disorders of the stomach, prevents sickness after meals and creates an appetite, but if made too strong, it disgusts the taste. The tops with the flowers on them, dried and powdered, are good against agues, and have the same virtues with wormseed in killing worms. The juice of the large leaves which grows from the root before the stalk appears is the best against the dropsy and jaundice, in water, ale, wine, or the juice only. The infusion drank morning and evening for some time helps hysterics, obstruction of the spleen and weakness of the stomach. Its oil, taken on sugar and drank after, kills worms, resists poison, and is good for the liver and jaundice. eyes like the leaves, hence the root should be accounted among the best stomachics. The oil of the seed cures quotidian and quartans. Boiled in lard and laid to swellings of the tonsils and quinsy is serviceable. It is admirable against surfeits.... Wormwood and vinegar are an antidote to the mischief of mushrooms and henbane and the biting of the seafish called *Draco marinus*, or quaviver; mixed with honey, it takes away blackness after falls, bruises, etc., . . . With Pellitory of the Wall used as poultice to ease all outward pains. Placed among woolen cloths it prevents and destroys the moths.'

Another old writer affirmed that Mugwort was good 'for quaking of the sinews.'