

St John's Wort

Written by Malcolm Brown

Saturday, 03 March 2012 13:14 - Last Updated Saturday, 03 March 2012 13:41

FEBRUARY 2012: ST JOHN'S WORT (*Hypericum Perforatum*)



Description and Habitat: St John's Wort is a native British upright perennial reaching a height of up to 90 cm. It grows throughout Britain and Europe and well into Asia and prefers open, sunny situations including uncultivated ground, woods, hedges, roadsides and meadows. The smooth stem branches in its upper part, bearing opposite oblong pointed leaves which have numerous translucent oil glands on the underside. The bright yellow five-petaled flowers have over fifty stamens, fused in the lower part into three bundles. Blooming from June to August, the long petals and shorter sepals are marked with dark dots. The flowers are followed by numerous small black round seeds in a three-celled capsule.

Common Names: Common St. John's Wort, Perforate St. John's Wort, Amber, Goatweed, Johnswort, Klamath weed, Tipton weed, Chase Devil, Devil's Flight, Grace of God, Penny John, Balm of the Warrior's Wound, Devil's Scourge, Witches Herb, Touch and Heal.

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Its name 'Hypericum' is derived from the Greek and means 'over an apparition'. This was a reference to the belief that if the plant was placed above religious figures its obnoxious smell would ward off evil spirits. The common name St. John's Wort is believed to come from the fact that its yellow petals 'bleed' a red juice when crushed and that it flowers around the 24th of June, the date on which St. John the Baptist was beheaded. The names "Balm of the Warrior's Wound" and "Touch and Heal" reflect its use in stopping bleeding.

Parts used: Aerial parts only. The fresh flowers are used to make the oil of St. John's Wort which is made by infusing the flowers in olive, sunflower or almond oil.

Medicinal Action and Uses: Widely use for medicinal purposes since the times of the Ancient Greeks, St John's Wort is a sedative, astringent, anti-inflammatory, analgesic and antiseptic and has long been used as a nerve healer and to give an improved sense of well being. Widely used for depression, exhaustion and convalescence, it was also used to treat insomnia, cramps, hysteria, epilepsy, dysentery, diarrhea, jaundice, worms, hemorrhages, bladder, lung and bowel complaints and bed wetting in children.

Both the restorative and relaxing actions of the herb are relatively long-term ones and therefore treatment can be continued for some time. Clinical trials have reported improved sleep quality, an increase in deep sleep phases, and an improvement in cognitive functions as well as significant improvement in mood and levels of interest and activity. In a preliminary study of a St John's Wort preparation combined with light therapy in patients with seasonal affective disorders, the antidepressant effect was shown to be enhanced by light therapy.

St John's Wort has a reputation as an analgesic and is used either internally or externally to treat neuralgic pain. The oil can be applied externally for neuralgia and will ease the pain of sciatica. It also soothes burns by lowering the temperature of the skin. It can also be used to treat local and peptic ulcers and inflammation of the lining of the upper digestive tract. Its astringent action is due primarily to the high levels of tannins in the flowers and the volatile oil has an anti-inflammatory action. Some anti-viral activity has been reported for St John's Wort against the HIV and Hepatitis C viruses.

Caution: Excessive exposure to bright sunlight should be avoided while using St John' Wort as it causes hypersensitivity to light.

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Additional comments and Folklore: The oil glands on the leaves can be seen if you hold the leaf up to the light when it will appear perforated. In view of the considerable benefits this plant provides as well as its ability to deter evil spirits, it is said that these perforations are needle pricks from the Devil when he tried to make the plant wither and die.

This is from a 15th Century manuscript (St John the Baptist's Day is 24th June):

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 gather the plant for a charm:
Rub the lintels and post with that red juicy flower
No thunder nor tempest will then have the power
To hurt or hinder your houses: and bind
Round your neck a charm of similar kind. (7)

If children had nightmares a sprig of St John's Wort and dried Thyme was put inside the mattress to aid restful sleep. Rubbing dried leaves on wrists or temples relieves stress while sleeping on a sachet of St John's Wort and Sage will give you prophetic dreams. The Knights of St. John of Jerusalem used it to treat wounds during the Crusades and as the flowers are yellow, the herb was used in the past according to the Doctrine of Signatures to treat jaundice and 'choleric' humours.

A Celtic charm against witchcraft and the evil eye, witches used St John's Wort to help them hear spirits. The red juice from crushed leaves was called "Witches Blood" and used in love potions and in various spells since the time of the ancient Greeks. Inhaling the scent of the crushed leaves would make demons flee from the possessed. It was also considered sensible to carry a sprig of St John's Wort with you if you were out on your own at night to avoid possession by devils. The plant was believed to provide protection from fire and lightning and the flowers were placed over religious images for protection against evil. During the Burning Times, a handful of St. John's Wort was often stuffed into an accused witch's mouth to force her to confess.

If a childless woman walked out naked to pick St John's Wort, she could expect to conceive

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within the year (hardly surprising!). In Medieval Scotland it was believed to improve poor milk production in women but had to be found by accident and tucked under the left armpit!

On the Isle of Wight it was commonly believed dangerous to step on St John's Wort as a fairy steed would appear from the plant, take the person to unseen realms and leave the person far away from home. Elsewhere it was considered dangerous to step on the plant otherwise a fairy would carry you off. The plant was believed to be able to move around to avoid picking. On the Isle of Man it was believed to be a sacred fairy plant while elsewhere it was believed to be an anti-fairy plant and would protect you from fairy spells.

In Scotland the plant is dedicated to St Columba. Columba found his child cattle herder weeping because he was afraid his cattle would wander off at night. Columba picked a St John's Wort flower and put it under the child's arm, telling him to sleep in peace and no harm would befall him. If St John's Wort is tied to a cradle the baby will never be ill-wished and will thrive.

Welsh families frequently used St. John's Wort to judge the relative life span of family members. A sprig of the herb was given to each family member and then hung from the rafters during the night. In the morning, depending on how shriveled each person's sprig was, the length of each individual's life was then determined.

There is an old tradition of smoking the plant over a fire on St John's Day and leaping over the flames. It was also burnt on Midsummer's Day and the smoke wafted over houses and fields for purification.

{jcomments on}