

Lovage



Levisticum officinale

Photo: zenryaku, 2/22/08

Description

Lovage, *Levisticum officinale*, an herb whose leaves resemble celery is one of the first to generally sprout in the spring. The leaves, stems and seeds are used in cooking and for medicinal purposes. The leaves and stems can be used fresh or crystallized. The seeds however should be dried; leaves can also be stored this way.¹ The taste is very strong and can be overwhelming if too much is used.

Lovage is a perennial and has become common in gardens or its ornamental appeal. The root is carrot like but grey-brown in color. Stalks are hollow and can reach three to four feet in height. Leaves look like celery leaves with a shiny green color.^{1,2}

Cultivation

Lovage is easy to cultivate. They grow best in sunny areas with rich moist soil. In the spring seedlings can be planted, but this is best done in the fall. Fall is also the best time to divide plants. Plants should be planted about a foot apart and will generally come up on their own with little care.³

Origin

According to the Ancient Greek physician and pharmacist, Dioscorides, lovage was referred to as *ligusticum* because it grew wild in shady areas in the Alps of Liguria. He described the plant's characteristics as resembling dill with a thin stalk and subtly aromatic leaves. Its fruit is black like fennel with a stronger smell.²

History

In 1892, J. Bornmuller found a form of the plant, *Levisticum officinale*, growing wild in the mountains of Persia and southwestern Asia. It most likely spread later to Italy as a cultivated plant from the Near East region.¹

It is also an old English herb often cultivated for its sweetness and use in medicines. In the fourteenth century, it was used as a drug known for its attractive aroma.³

In Harvard, Massachusetts during the mid to late nineteenth century, the Shakers sold herbs across a large territory in Cape Cod. Many herbs like lovage were sold for use in the home or resale. Watervliet was a specific community selling lovage in Harvard.⁴

Uses

Culinary

In the late nineteenth century, lovage was used as a confectionary ingredient in France. It also flavored preserves and was often used with borage to spice soups. Also, in France, Piedmont, and Wallis, the leaves and stalks were cooked like celery. It is used primarily as a flavoring in sauces and rarely mixed with fried foods. Dioscorides also mentions that it was often used as a substitute for pepper to season.²

Medicinal

Various parts of the herbs are used in medicines. The roots are useful for their appealing smell and stimulant uses that relieve stomach pains and fevers. The roots are also helpful in relieving gravel, jaundice and urinary problems. An infusion of the seeds was used as a cure for red and irritated eyes. It is also helpful as a gargling solution to cleanse the mouth.³

According to Dioscorides, the fruit and roots of the herbs were consumed to relieve the stomach pains and flatulence. It also was used to cure snake bites.²

¹ Ortiz, Elisabeth L., ed. *The Encyclopedia of Herbs, Spices, and Flavorings*. New York: DK, 1996.

² Andrews, Alfred C., "Alimentary Use of Lovage in the Classical Period," *Isis*, 33, No. 4, 1941.

³ Grieve, M. "A Modern Herbal-Lovage." *A Modern Herbal*. 2 Mar. 2008

<<http://botanical.com/botanical/mgmh/s/lovage-05.html#commed>>.

⁴ Miller, Amy Bess. *Shaker Herbs: A History and a Compendium*. General Publishing Company Limited: New York, 1976