

Artemisia

Herb of the Year 2014

Artemisia is a genus of herb with 300-400 species of annuals, biennials, perennials or subshrubs that grow wild in adapted environments in almost all parts of the world. It is in the Asteraceae/Compositae family.

Although there are many varieties, the cultivation of Artemisia is the same. It should be planted in full sun, in well drained soil. Excess water, fertilized soil or shade will cause the plants to split, melt or become leggy. Artemisia is drought tolerant and deer resistant. Due to the heat, most Artemisia do better if cut down hard after a hot summer.

For this reason it is a plant that is especially suited to our south central Texas climate of hot summers and little water. Once established in your garden, it is very difficult to get rid of and some species actually are considered pests!

A few words of caution when planting Artemisia – do not plant near anise, beans, fennel, peas or sage as toxins from the roots will inhibit the growth of these plants.

Best varieties of Artemisia for Central Texas

Artemisia abrotanum (southernwood): Hardy shrub like perennial with grey-green threadlike foliage. Grows 3'-4' tall and 4'-5' wide.

Artemisia absinthium (wormwood): Soft silvery foliage. Grows 3'-4'

Artemisia annua (sweet Annie, sweet wormwood): Feathery fragrant foliage on 8' tall 4' wide plants, as an annual. Reseeds aggressively.

Artemisia arborescens: Aromatic evergreen shrubs with finely divided silver-grey leaves. The variety "Powis Castle" thrives in a sunny perennial border. Grows 2'-3' tall.

Artemisia dracunculus (French tarragon): Although delightful and used extensively in French cooking, this is a tender plant in south central Texas and does not do well in our hot summer heat. Substitute "Tagetes Lucida" Mexican mint marigold, which although stronger in flavor (use less) is a wonderful substitute.

Artemisia ludoviciana: Fast spreading tall (2'-3') clump-forming (can be aggressive) perennial Artemisia. Silver-green toothed leaves. This is a native in Western USA. Varieties: Silver King, Silver Queen & Valerie Finnis.

Artemisia vulgaris (Mugwort): Bushy (4'-8') aromatic sprawling herb with grey green foliage and small reddish-yellow disk flowers. Can be invasive.

History of Artemisia in various cultures

The name of the plant genus Artemisia has a rather colorful and mixed history. We find it mentioned first in the "Ebers Papyrus" an ancient Egyptian medical text dating from 1500 B.C. where it was recommended as a remedy for roundworm and digestive maladies.

According to some sources it was named for Artemisia the sister/wife of the Persian Satrap Mausolous, whose fame derives from the tomb built by his widow, Artemisia in the ancient city of Halicarnassus, today in modern Turkey. The word mausoleum derives from this tomb, considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. History tells us that Artemisia was a botanist and medical researcher and the plant genus Artemisia was named for her.

However, turning to **Greek sources** we find that *Artemisia vulgaris*, or common *mugwort* derives its generic name from that of the Greek moon goddess Artemis, a patron of women. The plant was listed in the Greek pharmacopoeia as an aid in women's menstrual cycles and to ease the transition to menopause.

Moving on to **the Romans**, who took all things Greek as their own, we find a recommendation to Roman soldiers to put Artemisia into their sandals. It was planted by the side of the road for this purpose and evidently cured tired aching feet.

The Druids used Artemisia to repel evil and poisons in fertility rites old beyond time.

The Anglo Saxons used it to repel insects.

Until the 19th Century posies of Southernwood (*A. abrotanum*) and Rue were used to ward off smells and diseases and as a general pesticide.

Nicholas Culpeper an English botanist, herbalist, physician and astrologer published *The English Physician* (1652) and the *Complete Herbal* (1653) wherein he wrote that southernwood mixed with oil would help cure baldness when rubbed on the head...

Essential oil of wormwood (*A. absinthium*) was one of the ingredients in Absinthe, an alcoholic aperitif made by Frenchman, Henri Pernod in 1797. One of the chemical constituents of the oil is Thujone, which causes hallucinations, seizures and sometimes death if taken in high doses or over a prolonged period of time.

This had the effect of giving wormwood a very bad reputation, but modern research has suggested that the culprit may have been the high percentage of alcohol used in producing the drink – 70%-80% ABV which may have resulted in the wild and erratic behavior of Absinthe drinkers.

Native Americans used to line their baskets with wormwood when storing acorns over the winter because it repelled the acorn worm. The Hopi tribe of the southwest used it to flavor corn. And it was used by almost all native people as an antidote and preventive for poison oak rash. The leaves were rubbed over exposed skin before walking into poison oak habitat.

Modern Uses for Artemisia

Although Artemisia has been used medicinally for over 2000 years, it has become very important in modern medicine as an anti-malarial and anti-cancer drug. As part of the World Health Organization's "Roll Back Malaria" Program *Artemisia annua* drug derivatives now are standard worldwide for treatment of the disease.

Mugwort (*A. vulgaris*) in Chinese known as "Ai ye" or "Hao-Shu" is used in "moxibustion" a method of heating acupuncture points on the body to treat physical conditions such as arthritis. Added to bath water mugwort soothes muscle and joint aches.

Mugwort is being used as a digestive tonic, in cancer treatments, as a remedy for skin problems and for repelling insects, especially moths.

Culinary uses: flavoring German and Italian sausage, beer, ale and tea. Tarragon with its peppery, licorice taste is used in food and as a digestive aid, relieving gas and stimulating the appetite. It is also a diuretic. Chewing the roots aids with toothache and numbs the taste buds.



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San Antonio Herb Society

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3310 N. New Braunfels
www.sanantonioherbs.org
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