

Lemon Balm (*Melissa officinalis*)

CommonNames: cure-all, melissa, sweet balm, bee-balm, balm.

Location: This herb can be found in the Mediterranean and Germany.

Description: The dried leaves of this herb are used medicinally.

Properties: Lemon balm can be used as a light sedative and has many medicinal uses.

Uses: Use lemon balm to treat attention deficit disorder (ADD), Grave's disease, herpes virus infection, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and insomnia.

Doses: This herb can be taken internally by use of tablets and tea. It can be applied externally as a cream.

Warnings: Do not take lemon balm if you take barbiturates for insomnia or anxiety, or if you have glaucoma

Lemon Balm organic

Also known as

Melissa officinalis, melissa, balm.

Introduction

Lemon balm is a mint with a distinctly lemony scent. Its botanical name *Melissa* is taken from the Greek word for bee, indicative of the plant's attractive power for bees and useful insects of all kinds. The term "balm" refers to balsam, the ancient world's most important sweet-smelling oils. For thousands of years herbalists used lemon balm to treat any kind of disorder of the central nervous system. The London Dispensary (1696) says: "An essence of Balm, given in Canary wine, every morning will renew youth, strengthen the brain, relieve languishing nature and prevent baldness." John Evelyn wrote: "Balm is sovereign for the brain, strengthening the memory and powerfully chasing away melancholy." Alcoholic tinctures of lemon balm were combined with lemon peel, angelica root, and nutmeg to make Carmelite water, a nineteenth-century tonic for migraine headache and neuralgia.

Constituents

Very small amounts of essential oil. The oil content of the leaf can be 2-3 times higher if the plant is grown under conditions of drought and heat.

Parts Used

The leaf, dried and cut.

Typical Preparations

Taken as a tea and added to skin ointments. Often combined with valerian when used as an aid for sleep. May also be administered as either an extract or capsule.

Summary

Lemon balm is useful for treating nervous disturbances of sleep and chronic gastrointestinal disorders, but its primary use today is in treating viral infections of the skin, especially herpes, both genital herpes and cold sores. Although it does not eliminate flare-ups, it relieves itching in hours and helps the lesions heal over in a few days. One scientifically controlled study followed 66 individuals who were just starting to develop a cold sore (oral herpes). Treatment with lemon balm cream produced significant benefits on the second day of the outbreak (usually the day symptoms are worst), reducing intensity of discomfort, number of blisters, and the size of the lesion.

Precautions

Make sure the product you are using is lemon balm, and not the less expensive citronella.

Botanical: *Melissa officinalis* (LINN.)

Family: N.O. Labiatae

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---**Synonyms**---Sweet Balm. Lemon Balm.

---**Part Used**---Herb.

---**Habitat**---A native of South Europe, especially in mountainous situations, but is naturalized in the south of England, and was introduced into our gardens at a very early period.

---**Description**---The root-stock is short, the stem square and branching, grows 1 to 2 feet high, and has at each joint pairs of broadly ovate or heart-shaped, crenate or toothed leaves which emit a fragrant lemon odour when bruised. They also have a distinct lemon taste. The flowers, white or yellowish, are in loose, small bunches from the axils of the leaves and bloom from June to October. The plant dies down in winter, but the root is perennial.

The genus *Melissa* is widely diffused, having representatives in Europe, Middle Asia and North America. The name is from the Greek word signifying 'bee,' indicative of the attraction the flowers have for those insects, on account of the honey they produce.

---**History**---The word Balm is an abbreviation of Balsam, the chief of sweet-smelling oils. It is so called from its honeyed sweetness. It was highly esteemed by Paracelsus, who believed it would completely revivify a man. It was formerly esteemed of great use in all complaints supposed to proceed from a disordered state of the nervous system. *The London Dispensary* (1696) says: 'An essence of Balm, given in Canary wine, every morning will renew youth, strengthen the brain, relieve languishing nature and prevent baldness.' John Evelyn wrote: 'Balm is sovereign for the brain, strengthening the memory and powerfully chasing away melancholy.' Balm steeped in wine we are told again, 'comforts the heart and driveth away melancholy and sadness.' Formerly a spirit of Balm, combined with lemon-

peel, nutmeg and angelica root, enjoyed a great reputation under the name of Carmelite water, being deemed highly useful against nervous headache and neuralgic affections.

Many virtues were formerly ascribed to this plant. Gerard says: 'It is profitably planted where bees are kept. The hives of bees being rubbed with the leaves of bawme, causeth the bees to keep together, and causeth others to come with them.' And again quoting Pliny, 'When they are strayed away, they do find their way home by it.' Pliny says: 'It is of so great virtue that though it be but tied to his sword that hath given the wound it stauncheth the blood.' Gerard also tells us: 'The juice of Balm glueth together greene wounds,' and gives the opinion of Pliny and Dioscorides that 'Balm, being leaves steeped in wine, and the wine drunk, and the leaves applied externally, were considered to be a certain cure for the bites of venomous beasts and the stings of scorpions. It is now recognized as a scientific fact that the balsamic oils of aromatic plants make excellent surgical dressings: they give off ozone and thus exercise anti-putrescent effects. Being chemical hydrocarbons, they contain so little oxygen that in wounds dressed with the fixed balsamic herbal oils, the atomic germs of disease are starved out, and the resinous parts of these balsamic oils, as they dry upon the sore or wound, seal it up and effectually exclude all noxious air.

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---Cultivation---Balm grows freely in any soil and can be propagated by seeds, cuttings or division of roots in spring or autumn. If in autumn, preferably not later than October, so that the offsets may be established before the frosts come on. The roots may be divided into small pieces, with three or four buds to each, and planted 2 feet apart in ordinary garden soil. The only culture required is to keep them clean from weeds and to cut off the decayed stalks in autumn, and then to stir the ground between the roots.

---Medicinal Action and Uses---Carminative, diaphoretic and febrifuge. It induces a mild perspiration and makes a pleasant and cooling tea for feverish patients in cases of catarrh and influenza. To make the tea, pour 1 pint of boiling water upon 1 oz. of herb, infuse 15 minutes, allow to cool, then strain and drink freely. If sugar and a little lemonpeel or juice be added it makes a refreshing summer drink.

Balm is a useful herb, either alone or in combination with others. It is excellent in colds attended with fever, as it promotes perspiration .

Used with salt, it was formerly applied for the purpose of taking away wens, and had the reputation of cleansing sores and easing the pains of gout.

John Hussey, of Sydenham, who lived to the age of 116, breakfasted for fifty years on Balm tea sweetened with honey, and herb teas were the usual breakfasts of Llewelyn Prince of Glamorgan, who died in his 108th year. Carmelite water, of which Balm was the chief ingredient, was drunk daily by the Emperor Charles V.

Commercial oil of Balm is not a pure distillate, but is probably oil of Lemon distilled over Balm. The oil is used in perfumery.

Balm is frequently used as one of the ingredients of pot-pourri. Mrs. Bardswell, in *The Herb Garden*, mentions Balm as one of the bushy herbs that are invaluable for the permanence of their leaf-odours, which,

'though ready when sought, do not force themselves upon us, but have to be coaxed out by touching, bruising or pressing. Balm with its delicious lemon scent, is by common consent one of the most sweetly smelling of all the herbs in the garden. Balm-wine was made of it and a tea which is good for feverish colds. The fresh leaves make better tea than the dry.'

---Refreshing Drink in Fever---

'Put *two sprigs* of Balm, and a *little* woodsorrel, into a stone-jug, having first washed and dried them; peel thin a small lemon, and clear from the white; slice it and put a bit of peel in, then pour in 3 pints of boiling water, sweeten and cover it close.'

'*Claret Cup*. One bottle of claret, one pint bottle of German Seltzer-water, a *small bunch of Balm*, ditto of burrage, one orange cut in slices, half a cucumber sliced thick, a liqueur glass of Cognac, and one ounce of bruised sugar-candy.

'Process: Place these ingredients in a covered jug well immersed in rough ice, stir all together with a silver spoon, and when the cup has been iced for about an hour, strain or decanter it off free from the herbs, etc.' (*Francatelli's Cook's Guide*.)

A bunch of Balm improves nearly all cups.