



## Artemisia - Wormwood *Artemisia absinthium*



**Family** Asteraceae

**Common names** Common wormwood, Old Woman, Absinth, Absinthe, St. John's Girdle, St. John's Beard, warmot

### Description

Wormwood is a perennial bush that grows to a one metre high and wide shape. At the base the firm, leafy stems branch up from the rootstock. The foliage is silver grey and is densely covered in fine hairs. When brushed it is silky to the touch. Lower cauline leaves are petiolate and deeply cut. The leaves change to become apetiolate on the flowering branches in summer. Flowers have no petals and consist of typical daisy receptacle. The many florets are dull yellow and glabrous which develop into brown seed capsules. The resulting seeds are tiny, fine and numerous. The bush is not deciduous but remains low over winter. In severe winter conditions wormwood needs protection from frost. At the beginning of summer there is rapid foliage growth as the flowering stems elongate and double in size. These need to be trimmed back in late autumn to reshape and tidy the bush. All Artemisia need full sun, good drainage and light soil. They prefer poor soil as apposed to richly nitrogenous loam. Typical of all grey foliaged herbs wormwood thrives best in dry climates and dislikes warm humid conditions. The tomentum of the dense fine hairs covering the foliage and stems retains any air borne moisture ensuring the plant has adequate water requirements. With prolific flowering habits wormwood will self seed readily. Either tip or heeled cuttings can be taken in spring and summer.

### Constituents

**Vitamins:** B complex, C  
**Minerals:** Manganese, calcium, sodium, potassium, silicon, small amounts of cobalt and tin  
**Actions:** With a wide spectrum of active constituents wormwood's range of medicinal use is large – anthelmintic, anti-inflammatory, anti-tumour, bitter tonic, choloretic, emmenagogue, stomachic

### Medicinal Uses

Artemisias have bitter sesquiterpene lactones which give all parts of the herb their typical 'bitter as woodworm' character. As the name infers one major medicinal use of this herb for treatment of gastrointestinal parasitic worms. It is also an effective upper digestive tract tonic herb. Wormwood is used as a bitter that stimulates gastric secretion at the same time having a carminative effect for poor digestion and bile production. As this is one of the bitterest tasting herbs it is usual to encapsulate dried, powdered leaf as the preferred method of ingestion. Dried wormwood can be incorporated into sachets and placed under the pillow to help with insomnia. Infused in alcohol this herb is used as a rubbing tincture for bad ankles, gout and fallen arches.

### Culinary Uses

Traditionally used in alcoholic beverages it is used in the production of gin and vermouth. Wormwood's most famous liqueur is absinthe. When first produced this

liqueur was far too potent. For many years absinthe was banned as excess consumption of the refined oil results in insomnia, nightmares, vomiting and convulsions. Government regulation in France now has restrictions on the percentage of wormwood extracts allowable in alcoholic beverages such as Chartreuse and Pernod due its infamous past of causing mental incapacity.

### **Other Uses**

Wormwood's botanical name comes from the ancient Greek name of a goddess. Artemis to the Greeks and Diana to the Romans was the goddess of the moon, wild animals and hunting. As the herb was used to treat a variety of female complaints it was acknowledged as being a woman's herb. In Mexico women wore garlands of wormwood on their heads as they performed the traditional annual dance to celebrate the Goddess of Salt Festival. An ancient love charm included wormwood. 'On St Luke's Day take marigold flowers, a sprig of marjoram, thyme and a little wormwood, dry them before a fire, rub them to powder; then sift it through a fine piece of lawn, and simmer over a slow fire, adding a small quantity of virgin honey, and vinegar. Anoint yourself with this when you go to bed, saying the following lines three times, and you will dream of your partner 'that is to be'.

"St Luke, St Luke be kind to me,  
In dreams let me my true love see"

As well as foreseeing the future there were more practical uses that wormwood was used in domestic duties. Dried wormwood was used in many ways as a vermifuge. It does repel many insects including ants, moths and fleas. Pillows using dried wormwood can be used for cats and dogs as bedding. Combined with dried English lavender, another flea repellent, add quantities of these two dried herbs to the stuffing when filling a pet pillow. Wormwood is also used in clothes drawers. Sew the dried herb into small material sachets and place these among natural fibre clothing made of wool, cotton, linen and silk. Moths and other insects that will eat natural fibre will be deterred. Similar sachets can be made with a long ribbon attachment to tie round coat hangers to be used in wardrobes. A lid with dried wormwood can be placed within cupboards and under benches to deter ants entering inside the house.

### **Precaution**

Because of its potent actions on the human body's gastric and nervous systems it is recommended that the internal use of this herb is not for long term usage and should not exceed recommended dosage.

Thujone is a potentially poisonous chemical found in Wormwood. Wormwood containing thujone is unsafe when taken in large amounts or over a long period of time. Do not take during pregnancy or if breast feeding.

Wormwood may decrease the effectiveness of medications used to prevent seizures.

It is recommended that wormwood is taken under the supervision of a Medicinal Herbalist or other suitably qualified person.

### **References**

Herbs & Things – Jeanne Rose; A Modern Herbal – Mrs M. Grieve; Materia Medica of Western Herbs for the Southern Hemisphere – Carole Fisher & Gilian Painter; Elixirs of Life – Mrs C F Leyel