

## **Medieval Plant Verities on Display at War of the Wings 2023**

### **by Lorelei Greenleafe, OP**

#### **Ginger**

*Zingiber officinale* - A common spice transported along the silk road. “On Ginger: The quality of ginger is warm and dry, but it happens to tend toward corruption, in part because it rots like wood corroded by worms. It helps a chilled stomach by drying out its excessive moisture, contracted by eating green fruit. It is also considered an antidote against the bites of poisonous creatures.” Platina, *De honesta voluptate: et valitudine* (1480).

#### **Comfrey – Knit Bone**

*Symphytum officinale* - Comfrey leaves were used to wrap wounds and broken bones. It is high in allantoin, which is an ingredient for skin and wound care. Native to Europe, naturalized in North America. Some medieval texts caution against ingesting comfrey preparations, it was generally considered safe for treating internal ailments including indigestion, ulcers, gastrointestinal cramping or bleeds, respiratory congestion, diarrhea, and rheumatic complaints (von Hildegard 133).

#### **Oregano**

*Origanum vulgare* - First documented use is by the Greek, where the physician Hippocrates (460-370 BC) used oregano for antiseptic purposes and to protect against respiratory ailments and gastrointestinal distress. Romans began using it to flavor food. Used in middle ages in Europe as both a culinary herb and medicinally. Oregano leaves were often chewed to alleviate rheumatism, toothache, indigestion, and cough.

#### **Sage**

*Salvia officinalis* – In medieval times, sage leaves were made into tea and drunk to improve memory, hence the term Sage Advice. It was also used to treat fevers, liver disease, and epilepsy. It’s culinary use was widespread and especially popular in flavoring fish and chicken dishes. It is thought that sage was used in ancient Egypt to treat stomach ailments, toothache, and asthma. It was listed in the Ebers Papyrus (1500 BC) as a remedy for itching. Hippocrates praised its strengthening qualities as well as its helpful effects on menstruation.

## **French Sorrel**

*Rumex scutatus* –sorrel (from the French word meaning sour) has a lemony sour flavor due to the high oxalic acid content. It has been used in salads, soups, and stews. Medicinally it is said to promote healthy digestion, treat mouth ulcers, and decrease inflammation. Also called sour dock. Mentioned by Pliny the Elder in the 1st century ad and numerous medieval cookbooks. Great on plain fish when made into a sauce.

## **Golden Alexanders**

*Zizia aurea* – Alexanders, related to celery, carrots, and parsley, was a popular European medieval plant used as both a food and a medicinal herb. It was brought to Europe by the Romans where all parts of the plant were used. The leaves were used to cure scurvy, the fruit for asthma and the juice of the root as an appetite stimulant, diuretic, and laxative.

## **Good King Henry**

*Blitum bonus-henricus* – *Good King Henry*, native to central and southern Europe, is also known as Lincolnshire spinach, Goosefoot, and Poor Man's Asparagus. The plants name is derived originally from the German, "Guter Henrick." It was regularly grown in medieval kitchen gardens across Europe as a potherb. The leaves were used in salads and added to pottage. The taste is similar to spinach and the stalks and flower buds are also edible. It is rich in vitamins A, C, and iron, and a poultice of the leaves was used to sooth the skin and treat boils.

## **Fennel**

*Foeniculum vulgare* – is related to carrots with aromatic foliage and a taste similar to anise. It is native to southern Europe and the Mediterranean, and is considered to be one of the oldest medicinal herbs in the world. The Mesopotamians were using it as early as 3000 BC to flavor foods and as medicine. In medieval times, on Saint Johns Eve, people would plug the keyholes of their doors with fennel to ward off evil spirits. Both the seeds and the plant are found in numerous medieval cookbook recipes such as can be found in the Book of Gode Cookery. the <http://www.godecookery.com/goderec/goderec.htm>

## **Arugula**

*Eruca sativa* – a tangy green in the mustard family. There are references to arugula in the Old Testament, Virgil penned a poem mentioning the leaf, *Venerem revocans eruca morantem* (or, loosely translated, “... and arugula, which recalls the lagging wish for sexual delights”). It also appears in Pliny the Elder’s *Historia Naturalis*, circa 77 AD. It is prized as an aphrodisiac (with little proof.) It is excellent in salads, prepared with fish, and paired cheese.

## **Skirret**

*Sium sisarum* – is also known as sugar root (derived from the Dutch suikerwortel). It was grown as a vegetable for the starchy white edible roots and although it originated in Asia, it was all over Europe by the Roman times. Hildegard von Bingen mentioned the properties of skirret in her *Physica*. “Skirret (gerla) is hot and dry. Eaten in moderation, it is not very helpful or harmful. If someone should eat a lot of it, it’s heat and dryness would stir up fevers in him and harm his intestines. A person whose face has weak skin, which easily splits, should pound skirret in a mortar and add oil. When he goes to bed at night, he should rub it on his face, continuing until he is healed.”