

A Brief History of Wormwood

Bad Boy and Saint

Wormwood, or *Artemisia absinthium*, is an herbaceous plant that grows in temperate regions of Europe, Asia and northern Africa. We also grow this variety at Pacific Botanicals. Wormwood has historically been used to support the healing from a variety of ailments. Usually in the form of a very bitter tea made from the dry leaves. For the faint of heart wormwood is also available as a tincture or powder.

The Ancient Egyptians swore by wormwood to get rid of their intestinal worms. The Aztecs had to agree, but took things a few steps further and prescribed wormwood for all of the following: to expel intestinal parasites, aid digestion, stimulate the appetite, promote menstruation or use on infected wounds or exposed ulcers. The Ancient Greeks dedicated wormwood

to their goddess Artemisia, and claimed that the plant could counteract poison; whether it was poison from hemlock, mushrooms, or sea dragons, wormwood was the antidote you needed. Hippocrates also prescribed it for jaundice, anemia, rheumatism and menstrual pains.

In Shakespeare's time wormwood was used to help wean babies, as the Nurse recalls in *Romeo and Juliet*: *"And she was wean'd, - I never shall forget it, - Of all the days of the year, upon that day: For I had then laid wormwood to my breast, Sitting in the sun under the dove-house wall; My lord and you were then at Mantua: - Nay, I do bear a brain: - but, as I said, When it did taste the wormwood on the nipple of my breast and felt it bitter, pretty fool, To see it tetchy and fall out with the breast!"*

A more recent discovery has been wormwood's efficacy as an anti-malarial agent.

Artemisinin (found in Chinese wormwood) is now used as the active ingredient in the anti-malarial combination therapy 'Coartem', which is produced by the World Health Organization in conjunction with Novartis.

Wormwood is also used as an ingredient in the distilled spirit Absinthe. The word absinthe comes from an Anglo-Saxon

word 'wermode' translates as 'mind preserver', which is quite funny when you consider absinthe's bad boy reputation. Wormwood was called 'absinthium' by Romans, derived from the word 'absinthial', which means 'bitter', and the Greek word 'apsinthion', which means 'undrinkable'.

The plant has a bitter taste that contributes to absinthe's distinctive flavor. Wormwood is also found in vermouth. The chlorophyll that remains in absinthe after infusion with wormwood gives absinthe its green color. After exposure to light, or through a natural aging process, the chlorophyll decomposes. This is why many vintage absinthes aren't green at all, but often amber, or even brown. Wormwood contains small amounts of the chemical *thujone*, which is found in a number of medicinal plants such as arborvitae (genus *Thuja*, hence the derivation of the name) Nootka Cypress, some junipers, mugwort, common sage, and tansy.

The chemical *thujone* for a long time was thought to be found in large quantities in absinthe and had a negative hallucinogenic effect on people. This has been disproved in tests in the modern era. Although in large concentrations *thujone* would be dangerous, the amounts in absinthe were not. It was more likely that in the early tests people were overdosing from alcohol. However, *thujone* is regulated as an ingredient in many countries including the U.S. Needless to say, this simple medicinal plant has been around the block a few times through the ages.

