

June 2008

## VERVAIN (*Verbena officinalis*)

Vervain is a very old companion of the human race. A member of the *Verbenaceae* family, vervain was considered sacred and powerful to the Romans. The Latin name of the genus comes from “sacred boughs” and Romans placed vervain on altars in honor of Venus and Diana. King Solomon is said to have cleansed the temple with vervain. Roman soldiers carried vervain with them into battle as a protection and homes were sprinkled with an infusion of the herb to keep out evil. It was used medicinally as a remedy for snakebite and diarrhea; chewing the plant and root was believed to strengthen gums and teeth.

In ancient Egypt, vervain was said to have originated from the tears of Isis, the goddess of birth, as she wept for the dead god Osiris. Druids revered vervain with the same regard as mistletoe, a holy herb for sacrificial rites. They gathered the herb when Sirius, the dog star, was on the rise and in the dark of the moon. Vervain was utilized in divination, consecration and ritual cleansing of sacred places. A magical drink called the Cauldron of Cerridwen is said to have contained rowan berries, sea water, lesser celandine, flaxweed and vervain. It inspired creative energy for bards, poets and prophets. Even today, to those who work in the realm of the underworld, vervain is sometimes added to a cup of wine drunk on Samhain to facilitate contact with the “beloved dead.” Vervain tea is helpful in divination, astral work and initiation into Druidic paths.

In the ancient British Isles, people held vervain over the fire to protect their livestock and strewed it over their fields at the summer solstice to insure fertility and a good harvest. Even today, pagans strew the herb over their gardens for the same reason. The concept of vervain as a sacred, purifying, protective plant later carried over into Christian culture, and folk legend stated that vervain was used to stanch the wounds of Jesus. Thereafter, it became known in the British Isles as “holy herb” or “devil’s bane.”

Medicinally, vervain has a long list of uses and an apparent broad range of healing powers, from febrifuge to astringent to blood tonic. The court physician to Theodosius I gave a remedy for tumors of the throat: cut a vervain root into two pieces. Tie one around the patient’s throat and hang one over the fire. As the heat of the flames begins to dry out one root, the tumor in the patient will correspondingly begin to shrivel as well. A suggestion in medieval times to banish pimples, which could be used today (!), was to stand outside with a handkerchief containing a handful of vervain. When a shooting star is streaking by, rub the vervain over the blemish and it will disappear. Be sure to not use your bare hands, though, as the pimple will transfer to your hands.

While most early medicinal uses of vervain have been either refuted or replaced, there are people in several cultures who continue to use the herb as a tonic for calming nerves and tension, to break fevers, as a digestive aid, to lift depression and lethargy, for migraines, to stimulate breast milk production, as an astringent for bleeding gums and mouth ulcers, and as a poultice for insect bites and wounds. Vervain is known to stimulate uterine contractions, so it should not be used in pregnancy. Further, at high doses it causes vomiting.

There are over 250 species in the *Verbenaceae* family. *Verbena officinalis* is native to the Old World, but naturalized readily here when it was brought over by the Puritans. The majority of the verbena species are native to the New World from Canada to Chile. Common vervain is a spiky looking plant about two feet tall with opposite lanceolate, deeply divided leaves. The flower is small, tubular, and purplish- or pinkish-white and located at the top of the plant. It is easily grown from seed and reseeds

easily (sometimes uninvited). The verbena family often attracts butterflies and the hummingbird hawk-moth. Some other names vervain is known by are van van, ferfaen, dragon's claw, enchanter's plant, Juno's tears, pigeon grass, altar plant, holy herb and herb of grace.

Until I researched vervain for this report, I was blissfully unaware that two of the MOST important functions of this plant are that it is an undisputed vampire repellent and a powerful ingredient of love potions. I will try it for these situations and let you know....

*Thanks to Maggie Dougherty-Roberts for this report on vervain. Her sources were Herbs by Lesley Bremness, Rodale's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Herbs, [Herbs2000.com](http://Herbs2000.com), Wikipedia and Alchemy-works.com.*