

Myrtle
Myrtus Communis
Family: Myrtaceae

Description

Myrtle is a small perennial shrub that grows in the shape of a tree up to 5m tall. It produces branched twigs with dark green shiny smooth-edged elliptic leaves 3-5cm long and white flowers with five petals and white stamens. The leaves emanate a strong resinous scent similar to eucalyptus or myrrh. A dark purplish black berry emerges, each containing several seeds.

Growing Tips

It likes full sun and well-drained soil. It can be grown indoors and out but is frost tender.

Parts Used

Leaves, flowers or berries

Uses

Though Myrtle can be used to flavour fruit salads, roast pork or lamb, the plant is mainly used for its ornamental value and can be shaped into a hedge.

In Sardinia the berries are macerated in alcohol to make a typical drink called "Mirto Rosso"; the leaves are made in the same fashion, into a dish called "Mirto Bianco". Other uses consist of the wood being used as fragrant fire wood and to smoke meats and fish.

The essential oil of the berries is highly antiseptic and is frequently used to treat sinusitis and herpes simplex.

Origin & History

Myrtle stems from the Mediterranean region and Northern Africa. Greek mythology assigns Myrtle to the goddess Aphrodite (female) on one hand, and to Demeter (agriculture) on the other.

It was an indispensable item in every Roman garden and they took it with them in their empirical pursuits. This is how it reached most European countries including England.

In Jewish tradition Myrtle symbolises masculinity and a sprig is worn by the bridegroom as he enters the nuptial chamber after the wedding ceremony.

A sprig of a Myrtle tree accidentally planted from Queen Victoria's bridal bouquet is now traditionally included in every royal wedding bouquet.

