



## French Tarragon

By Linda Johnson

A species of perennial herb in the Asteraceae family, French tarragon (*Artemisia dracunculoides*, *yin chen hao*, *long hao*) is preferred over Russian, Mexican and other species of tarragon. It was called dragon herb by the ancient Greeks and by those in medieval times who adhered to the doctrine of signatures, believing that an herb's appearance (in this case the roots) revealed the medicinal value. According to this philosophy tarragon was thought to cure snake bites, due to the serpentine shape of its roots.

Cultivation is by root division, as French tarragon seldom produces seeds or flowers. It grows 120-150 cm in rich, loamy soil that holds moisture but drains well. Since it has a shallow root system care must be taken not to cause damage when weeding. It prefers a pH of 6.5 and benefits from mulching. It also prefers full sun and grows well in zones 4a-8b.

Tarragon has slender branched stems and glossy green lanceolate leaves 2-8 cm long and 2-10 mm broad. It does well with average watering. It is unique in that during growth it seems to have little aroma, yet after the leaves are harvested the oils concentrate and start emitting their unique tarragon sweet smell, similar to freshly cut hay. Tarragon is a useful companion plant for just about everything, but especially eggplant. It can be susceptible to whitefly and spider mites.

The use of tarragon for medicinal purposes dates back to the ancient Greeks who used it as a general antiseptic, anesthetic, to combat halitosis, reduce pain associated with toothaches and improve the health of their teeth and gums. Although moderate consumption as a tisane or decoction is believed by some herbalists to prevent certain cardiac diseases and assist diabetics due to its anti-hyperglycemic properties, excessive intake acts as a laxative or emenagogue.

When crushed into a fine paste it may be applied to open lacerations, ulcerations, boils and wounds to help prevent infection and facilitate wound healing. Dried leaves may be employed as an inhalant to help relieve headaches and clear nasal and bronchial passageways. Its aromatherapeutic properties are said to ward off depression, remedy insomnia and soothe anxiety.

Hedge witches and shamans use tarragon as a calming herb and to attract love, luck and personal growth. It may be used in the creation of protective medicine pouches to evoke desirability, invigorate, enervate and bolster courage.

Tarragon is included in French cooking as one of the four fines herbes (the others are chervil, chives and parsley). It has been used in classical French cooking for centuries with chicken, fish, eggs, salads, sauces and to make the renowned tarragon vinegar.

In France tarragon is known as the King of Herbs, probably so named after King Henry IV, a beloved monarch who was known for being a gourmet. In 1836 a chef by the name of Collinet

opened a restaurant called “Le Pavillion Henry IV” in Henry’s honor. Collinet created a new sauce which was basically a hollandaise sauce infused with tarragon. In honor of Henry, who was born in Bearn, Collinet named the sauce Bearnaise.

References:

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