

Halloween Herbal Snippets

By Jen Munson



Mugwort, *Artemisia vulgaris*

In the language of flowers it represents "Happiness" and in medieval folklore it was a protective herb. It was hung in doorways and from rafters for protection from witches and the devil. Travelers would carry it on them in order to prevent fatigue and attack from wild animals. In more modern times and even today, folks will put sprigs under their pillow in order to generate vivid dreams while sleeping.



Mullein, *Verbascum thapsus*

The unassuming Mullein plant with its fuzzy leaves can be found growing along the side of the road in the poorest of soil conditions. During warm summer months it sends out a tall uninspiring stalk comprised of small yellow flowers that can grow upwards of 6'. Through history, dried flower stalks were soaked in tallow or oil and used as torches. This practice dates back to Ancient Roman times thru the Middle Ages when Witches would use Mullein torches to light their midnight incantations all the way to the California Gold Rush when miners would use them to light their way through mine shafts.



Pumpkin, genus *Cucurbita*

When these Jack O'Lantern creatures start appearing it's time to start thinking about Halloween. The Jack O'Lantern came about from Irish folklore and a character named Stingy Jack who played tricks on everyone including the Devil. He harassed the Devil to the point that the Devil agreed to never take his soul. Upon Stingy Jack's death Heaven wouldn't accept him because of his antics and the Devil kept his promise. The Devil gave him an ember with an eternal flame from Hell. Stingy Jack placed the ember in a carved turnip to light his way thru the darkness. The original Jack O'Lanterns were carved turnips filled with burning coal. It wasn't until the Colonists came to America and discovered pumpkins from the Indians that turnips were replaced by pumpkins and burning coal was replaced by candles.



Rue, *Ruta graveolens*

When protecting your home from witches and goblins this season consider Rue. Rue is a natural pest deterrent in the garden and its skunk like scent will deter humans as well. When planted close to the house it wards off witchcraft and trickery while rendering evil harmless.



Witch Hazel, *Hamamelis virginiana*

In New England Witch Hazel can be found blooming in October, but think twice before accepting a spray of Witch Hazel around Halloween. In the language of flowers Witch Hazel means "a spell." Water diviners have used its branches to locate underground springs of water and as a result it was once believed to be a tree of the devil. It's best known as an astringent for the skin to help heal minor cuts, acne and impetigo while frozen witch hazel soothes insect bites.

Additional Resources:

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Lust, John. *The Herb Book: The Complete and Authoritative Guide to More than 500 Herbs.* Beneficial Books, 2001.

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Simmons, Adelma Grenier. *Country Wreaths from Caprilands: the Legend, Lore, and Design of Traditional Herbal Wreaths.*

Uva, Richard H., and Joseph C. Neal and Joseph M. DiTomaso. *Weeds of the Northeast.* NY: Cornell University Press, 1997.