

DITTANY OF CRETE



Origanum dictamnus
[or-RI-ga-num dik-TAM-nus]
(*Amaracus dictamnus*)

Family: Labiatae

Names: Crete dittany, diktamo, Dittany of Candie, dictamnus, dittany, hop marjoram, Spanish hops, Hop Plant, Mangirotu; Dictame de Crete, dictame, dictame vrai, origan dictame (French)

Description: Prostrate subshrub with arching stems of woolly, gray-white leaves. Tiny pink flowers within large purple bracts are produced in pendant heads in summer. Height 5-6 inches, spread 16 inches. It is hardy to zone 7. It is in flower from June to August. The flowers are hermaphrodite (have both male and female organs) and are pollinated by Bees.

Cultivation: Requires a rather dry, warm, well-drained soil, but is not fussy as to soil type, thriving on chalk. Prefers slightly alkaline conditions.

Propagate by seed, stem cuttings, or divisions and grow in full sun. Particularly suited for hanging baskets. Seed - sow early spring in a greenhouse at 42 - 45°F and only just cover the seed. Germination usually takes place within 2 weeks. Prick out the seedlings into individual pots when they are large enough to handle and plant them out into their permanent positions in early summer. The seed can also be sown in situ in late spring.

Division in March or October. Very easy, larger divisions can be planted out direct into their permanent positions. It is better to pot up the smaller divisions and grow them on in light shade in a cold frame until they are well established before planting them out in late spring or early summer.

Basal cuttings of young barren shoots in June. Very easy. Harvest the shoots with

plenty of underground stem when they are about 8 - 10cm above the ground. Pot them up into individual pots and keep them in light shade in a cold frame or greenhouse until they are rooting well. Plant them out in the summer. Flower buds should be pinched off to stimulate leaf growth; if not done, the plant may flower and die. During the rest period in winter, indoor plants should be watered sparingly, but not allowed to dry out.

History: Mentioned in Charlemagne's list of herbs, dittany was popular in medieval times as a medicinal herb. Hippocrates recommended it for stomach and digestive system diseases, rheumatism, arthritis and used it to regulate menses, to tone and heal. The species name *dictamus* is derived from the mountain Dicte on the island of Crete, one of the mountains on the island where dittany of Crete grows. "Dittany" in the common name is also derived from this. In ancient times dittany of Crete was famous for its alleged property of expelling weapons imbedded in soldiers. Wild goats were reputed to seek out the plant after being struck by arrows; the goats were thought to eat the plant, and the arrows would fall out immediately. Shepherds saw this and would then ingest and later make compresses of the leaves to heal open wounds. In the tale of the Trojan wars by Virgil, the hero Aeneas was severely wounded by a deeply imbedded arrow that could not be extricated. His mother Venus went to Mount Ida on the island of Crete and retrieved some dittany of Crete, which was applied to the wound, causing the arrow to drop out and the wound to cure immediately. In ancient times it was believed that a snake would allow itself to be burned to death rather than cross the path of dittany of Crete. The locals called it also "eronda" which means love for its aphrodisiac properties. Popular in Minoan Crete and Ancient Greece, it was considered a highly therapeutic plant.

Constituents: Main component of the essential oil is carvacrol

Properties: Antirheumatic; Oxytoxic; Stomachic; Vulnerary.

Medicinal Uses: As a medicinal plant, the herb has been utilized to heal wounds, soothe pain, and ease childbirth. The root has been used in a salve to treat sciatica, and the juice was consumed in wine to cure snake bite. In addition, it has been used as a remedy against gastric or stomach ailments and rheumatism. It can be made into a warm drink where its aromatic healing properties can be used for use as an anticonvulsive and a menstrual tonic. Externally as a poultice on wounds and bruises. Strengthens the heart muscles and arteries. Adding cinnamon and honey it is soothing for a cough.

Ritual Uses: It is an excellent base for manifestations of spirits; the wraiths appear in the smoke rising from the censer. Language of flowers: passion.

Samhain Incense

4 parts Dittany of Crete
2 parts wormwood
2 part red sandalwood
1 part myrrh
1 part poppy seeds
½ part sage
½ part white sage
½ part cloves
¼ part bay leaves
½ part jasmine
6 drops of cedarwood oil
Pinch of salt petre if you want it to crackle and spit!

Flying Ointment Recipe

1 part Dittany of Crete
1 part Cinquefoil
1 part Mugwort
1 part Parsley

Gently heat 4 parts shortening over low heat until liquefied. Watch that it doesn't burn. Add 1 part dried herbal mixture, blend with a wooden spoon until thoroughly mixed, and continue heating until the shortening has extracted the scent. You should be able to

smell it in the air. Strain through cheesecloth into a heat-proof container such as a canning jar. Add ½ tsp of tincture of benzoin to each pint of ointment as a natural preservative. Store in a cool, dark place, such as the refrigerator. If it turns moldy, discard.

Culinary Uses: The leaves are used for flavoring salads and vermouth. A pleasant aromatic flavor, especially when mixed with parsley, thyme, garlic, salt and pepper. It was often combined with other herbs such as rue and parsley to make a pepper sauce for fish or omelets. In Saxon kitchens it was an ingredient of a sauce to be used with fish. Combined with parsley, garlic, thyme, salt and pepper, it added a pleasant flavor. Its beautiful chartreuse and pink flowers are still used in Crete to make tea. Dittany of Crete is generally recognized as safe for human consumption as a natural flavoring.

Recipes:

Sautéed Chicken

5 lbs. chicken parts

2.5 oz. olive oil

2.5 oz verjuice*

freshly ground cumin

dittany of crete, dried and ground

salt

ground almonds

Pat the chicken dry, flour, saute in oil and season with herbs. Deglaze pan with verjuice. Garnish with almonds. Dress chicken with the sauces.

*An acidic, sour liquid made from unripe fruit, primarily grapes.

References:

Culinary Herbs, Ernest Small, NRC Research Press, 1997; ISBN: 0-660-16668-2

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