



The Meaning of Herbs

⊕ MYTH, LANGUAGE & LORE ⊕

Gretchen Scoble and Ann Field





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Text by Ann Fiery

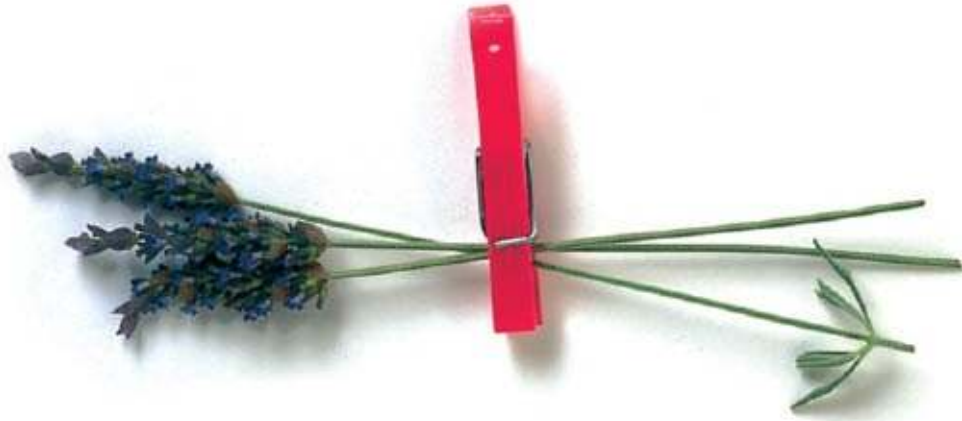
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To Matt, Kyle, and Nicole, for all your love and support — GS

For Clive, who continues to inspire — AF



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

Scoble, Gretchen. The meaning of herbs: myth, language & lore / Gretchen Scoble and Ann Field; text by Ann Fiery; photography by Holly Lindem.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-8118-3031-7 [hc]

ISBN 978-1-4521-4091-9 [epub, mobi]

I. Herbs-Folklore. I. Field, Ann. II. Fiery, Ann. III. Title.

GR780.S42 2000

363'.368-dc21

00-060129

CIP

Book and cover design by Gretchen Scoble

Calligraphy by Elvis Swift

Distributed in Canada by Raincoast Books

9050 Shaughnessy Street, Vancouver, British Columbia V6P 6E5

Chronicle Books LLC

85 Second Street

San Francisco, California 94105

www.chroniclebooks.com

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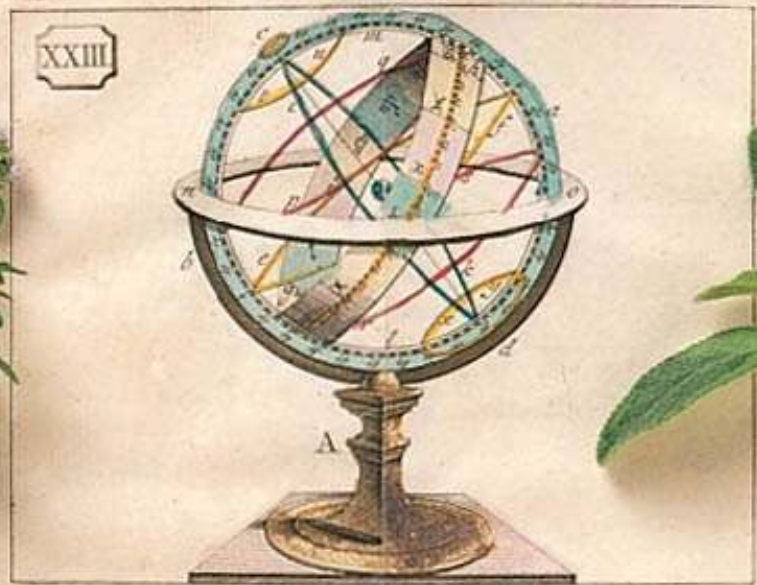
Introduction

IN THE THEATER OF THE GARDEN, THE FLOWERS ARE THE prima donnas. Brilliant and effusive, they lure us with the spectacles of color and entertain us with their wanton smells. But there, nestled next to the floral extravaganza, is the herb garden, smaller, perhaps, and more delicately scented but carrying within it a secret history, a lineage of magic, myth, and meaning that reaches back through millennia to the most ancient civilizations on earth. We all know that herbs provide us with rich and savory flavors for our meals, heady perfumes for our gardens and homes, and homey remedies for our aches and pains, but according to ancient wisdom, herbs were also essential for magical potions and love charms, for calling up fairies and elves, for keeping warm or cooling down, for ensuring immortality, for soothing the baby, for making wine.

In addition to such practical applications, each herb told a story or held a meaning within its fragrant leaves. The bay, for example, was worn as a crown by Apollo in honor of the lovely Daphne, who was transformed into a bay tree as he pursued her; accordingly, the wreath of bay leaves became the symbol of honor for Roman generals and emperors. Like a flower, an herb tucked into a bouquet, however inconspicuous it may look, carries with it a cache of meaning—a simple stem of chamomile suggests patience in adversity, while a sprig of verbena represents sensitivity, and rosemary is the sign of remembrance.

Treasured by the cook, beloved by the gardener, cherished by the healer, the humble herb is the practical, plain cousin of the flower—or is it? The line that demarcates herb from flower is in truth nonexistent, which is why you'll find rose, poppy, foxglove, and other constituents of the floral population in this book. Officially, an herb is defined as a plant without woody tissues, meaning, more or less, that any plant that's not a tree, bush, or shrub is a herb. More traditionally, an herb is defined by its uses: plants employed in the kitchen and the medicine chest are herbs, and plants that are merely ornamental are flowers. Of course, it was only by long—and occasionally dangerous—experimentation that the culinary or medicinal attributes of a given plant were established. Beginning in the Middle Ages, naturalists began compiling catalogues of information about herbs in order to pass along the results of that experimentation. These books, called herbals [hard "h" optional], combined all the best qualities of the cookbook, first-aid kit, advice column, gardening manual, and tall tale into one fabulous volume. In a herbal a typical entry for a given herb would include a description of the herb's behavior in the garden, instructions for using it to repel witches, a prescription for its application to various wounds, a recipe containing an explanation of how to make a hair tonic, and a few extra bits of general advice about life. It is on such marvelous models that we have patterned this book, including a bit of gardening lore here, a touch of cooking wisdom there, a couple of compelling remedies, and the occasional antique legend.

The herb garden has its secrets, and those who would journey along its shady paths and ancient byways will find this a useful handbook for their travels.



Coriander

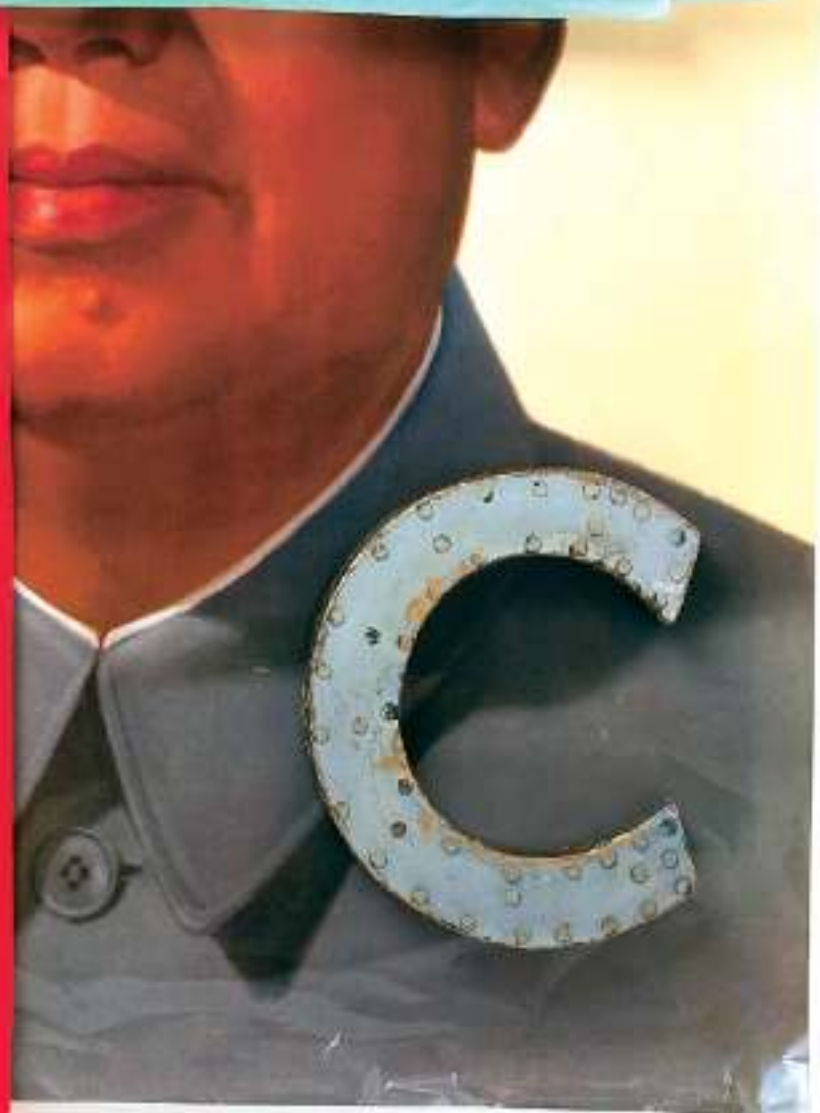
[CORIANDRUM SATIVUM]

The leaf of the coriander plant constitutes an herb in its own right——cilantro, or Chinese parsley——while the seed, whole or ground, has been used in cooking for over five thousand years, making the plant as a whole extraordinarily valuable to the chef. ¶ Coriander makes an appearance in the Old Testament, where it is compared to the manna that God provided for the Israelites in their wanderings.

The seeds are used in the manufacture of gin and were mentioned in the *Arabian Nights* as having aphrodisiac qualities, but coriander is considered a witch's herb in England. Its magical reputation may stem from the fact that it has a nasty aroma until its seeds ripen, when its scent suddenly——magically——changes to a pleasant one. Perhaps this is also the source of coriander's meaning in the Victorian language of flowers: hidden merit.

Coriander is rather slow to grow and likes plenty of sun, but it will repay attention by supplying an aromatic bounty to the cook.

得山水清



Parsley

[PETROSELINUM SPECIES]

The humble sprig of parsley that huddles ignominiously on restaurant plates marks a sad decline in the fortunes of this herb, which was held in such esteem by the ancient Greeks that they wreathed their victorious athletes in parsley and crowned bridesmaids with circlets of parsley and hyacinth. Parsley was dedicated to Persephone, the queen of the underworld, and parsley seed was believed to go back and forth to and from Hades nine times before sprouting, which accounts for its long germinating period. The association with the underworld made parsley an herb of death; corpses were draped in parsley garlands. The Romans were fond of parsley: they spread it on their bread for breakfast, threw parsley seeds into their fish ponds to cure sickly fish, and wore it around their necks when they went drinking to dispel intoxication.

In the middle ages, parsley was believed to be the central ingredient in the potion that witches rubbed on their brooms to make them fly. ¶ In England, parsley's ragged leaves were attributed to pixies, who tore them up as a punishment to those who would replace tulip beds with the more utilitarian kitchen garden, tulips being the cradles for pixie babies.

In the language of flowers, parsley was a call for festivity.

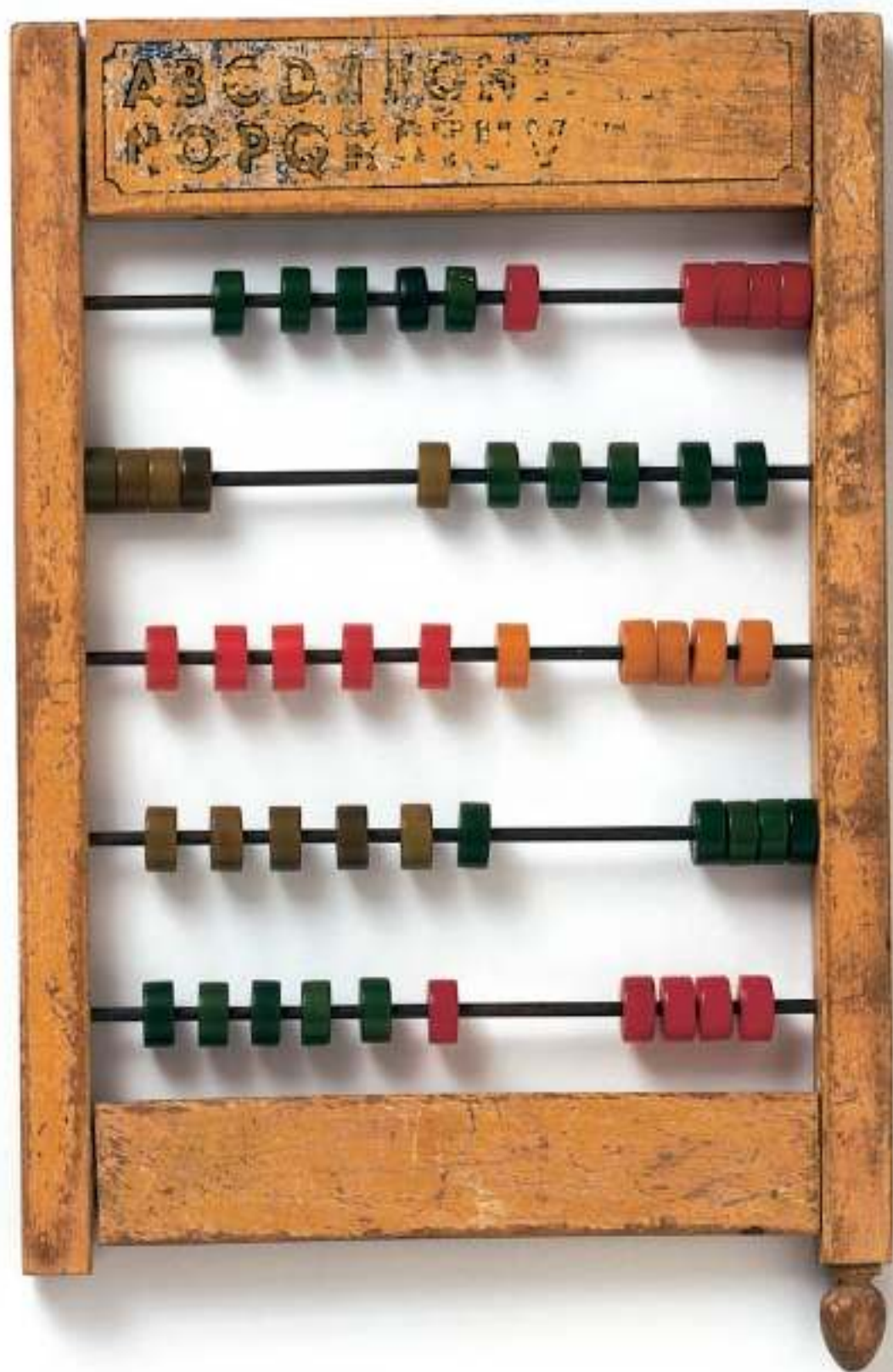


Nettle

[URTICA DIOICA]

¶ There are a great many kinds of nettles, and nearly all of them feature stinging hairs on their leaves and stems, which accounts for their genus name, from the Latin *uro*, “I bite.” Accordingly, these tall, leafy plants are commonly viewed as a garden scourge and exterminated with gusto. This antinettle sentiment is shortsighted, though, and should be reconsidered. First of all, the nettle kindly contains an antidote to its stings in the juice of its leaves, which brings rapid relief when applied to the afflicted area. Second, the nettle should be respected as one of the most ancient sources of cloth in Europe; thread made of nettle stalks antedates that of both flax and hemp and has been found in burial sites of the late Bronze Age. Third, the soldiers of the Roman Empire, finding the British winter unendurably cold, warmed themselves by chafing their skins with nettles. This may seem excessive, but it should be remembered if you find yourself without a coat in a nettle patch during a snowstorm. Fourth, nettle soup and pudding are said to be delightful [though it’s the Scots who say so, and they eat haggis]. Fifth, you can make nettle beer by boiling and straining nettle tops, dandelions, goosegrass, and ginger in 4 quarts of water. Add brown sugar to taste, then place a slice of toasted bread spread with yeast on the top of the liquid, which you keep warm for 6 or 7 hours. Remove the scum from the surface, add 1 teaspoon of cream of tartar and decant into bottles. In 6 months, you will have a tasty beer that doubles as a remedy for gout. Sixth, boiled nettle water by itself is an excellent hair conditioner.

However, it must be admitted that nettle does sting; each of those hairs conceals a cache of formic acid. All nettles should be dealt with carefully. Unsurprisingly, the meaning of the nettle in the Victorian language of flowers was cruelty.



Calendula

[CALENDULA OFFICINALIS]

Calendula and *calendar* are derived from the same latin word, reflecting the plant's almost continuous blooming season. This sun-loving orange flower is also known as pot marigold, *oculus Christi*, and, amusingly enough, jackanapes on horseback.

Though it is occasionally thrown into a stewpot as an herb, and the orange petals are still sometimes used to color butter, calendula is most famous for its curative properties. The flower petals have been known for hundreds of years to provide an effective poultice for bites and stings, and the juice of the plant is available even now in ointments and lotions for chapped or burned skin. During the Civil War, both the Northern and Southern armies used calendula to bind up wounds. ¶ In Mexico, however, calendula is called the flower of death because it is believed to have sprung up from the blood of natives killed by the Spanish invaders, and it is used to adorn gravestones on the Day of the Dead.

Strangely, the marigold is the symbol of mental anguish in flower language.



Ginseng

[PANAX GINSENG {ASIA}, PANAX QUINQUEFOLIUS {NORTH AMERICA}]

¶ The root of the ginseng plant is regarded as an omnipotent healer in China, where there are a number of legends about its origins, including the belief that the herb grew when lightning struck a clear stream. According to Chinese herbalists, ginseng is a lifelong cure-all, treating baby colic at one end of the spectrum and mitigating the depredations of age at the other. It is believed to improve the mental powers as well as the physical, extend the life span, and increase the libido——all at the same time.

The ginseng plant attains a height of a mere twelve inches, but that achievement takes six to seven years, and the plant extracts so many minerals and nutrients from the soil that the earth in which it grows is exhausted and requires a decade to recover. As a result, ginseng was for many years in extremely limited supply and terrifically expensive in China and other East Asian countries. In the eighteenth century, wild ginseng was found in Canada and exported to China, where it was sold for many times its weight in silver. Once cultivated only for export to Asia, North American ginseng is now consumed in the West in teas and powders as a remedy for insomnia and general debilitation.



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Lavender

[LAVANDULA SPECIES]

The aroma of lavender, at once delicate and invigorating, is among the world's most beloved. Lavender is native to the Mediterranean region, and though there are many varieties of the herb, the most highly scented, *Lavandula angustifolia*, is the most difficult to grow, as it prefers altitudes of 2,000 to 5,000 feet. Common lavender, *L. officinalis*, is a more docile plant, growing happily at a more reasonable 1,500 feet, and is widely planted in France, Italy, and England. In France alone over 700 tons of distilled lavender essence are produced each year.

It's no wonder—the lovely smell of lavender has been treasured for centuries, beginning with the ancient Romans, who used lavender to perfume their baths and so derived its name from *lavare*, “to wash.” ¶ There is an old legend that lavender received its scent from the baby Jesus: when Mary washed his swaddling clothes, she hung them out to dry on a silvery lavender bush, and ever since, the smell of heaven has lingered on the plant.

Still employed for medicinal purposes, the flowers were once boiled in water to create a headache tonic and added to wine to soothe the “swooning of the heart.” Modern-day aromatherapists recommend lavender to ease tension and relieve fatigue.

In the language of flowers, lavender symbolized mistrust.

21. LEÇON. — LES NOBLES ET LE PEUPLE

61. Sous le régime féodal on appelait nobles tous les seigneurs. Ils avaient des châteaux forts, des guerriers, et ils étaient les maîtres de tous les habitants de leurs domaines.

62. Le peuple comprenait les vilains¹ et les serfs.

63. Les vilains étaient les artisans² et les cultivateurs libres.

64. Les serfs étaient les cultivateurs non libres. Les serfs étaient attachés à la glèbe, c'est-à-dire à la terre qu'ils cultivaient : ils ne pouvaient la quitter et ils changeaient de maître en même temps qu'elle.



Un château féodal.

RÉCIT. — Le château féodal

1. Le château du seigneur se dressait ordinairement sur une colline élevée.

2. C'était un édifice vaste et sombre, entouré de larges fossés et de hautes murailles flanquées³ de tours.

3. Un pont-levis⁴, établi en face de la porte principale, permettait de franchir le fossé ; mais, à l'approche

de l'ennemi, on relevait ce pont contre la porte, au moyen de chaînes.

4. Au milieu de la cour intérieure, s'élevait une grosse tour appelée donjon, fortifiée par des tourelles, et entourée d'un fossé à pont-levis. C'est dans le donjon que le seigneur gardait ce qu'il avait de plus précieux.

5. Les cabanes des vilains et des serfs se groupaient autour du château féodal, bâti surtout pour servir de refuge aux populations contre la fureur des Normands.

6. Un guetteur⁵ veillait nuit et jour au haut du donjon, pour observer la campagne. Si l'ennemi apparaissait au loin, le guetteur sonnait du cor ; aussitôt les hommes d'armes se préparaient à la défense, et les paysans, abandonnant leurs travaux, couraient chercher un asile auprès du seigneur.

7. Lorsque la première enceinte⁶ était forcée par l'ennemi, les défenseurs du château se retiraient dans le donjon, et, quand tout espoir était perdu, ils s'évadaient par de longs souterrains conduisant ordinairement dans une forêt du voisinage.

Explication des mots.

1. Vilains : les vilains furent ainsi appelés parce qu'ils habitaient des maisons de campagne ou fermes nommées villas. — 2. Artisans : ceux qui ont un métier manuel, comme les charpentiers, les cordonniers... — 3. Murailles flanquées de tours : murailles fortifiées par des tours bâties sur leurs flancs ou côtés, de distances en distance. — 4. Pont-levis : pont qu'on peut lever à volonté. — 5. Guetteur : celui qui guette, qui surveille du haut d'une tour ou d'un clocher. — 6. Enceinte : muraille qui entourait le château ; quelques châteaux forts avaient deux et même trois enceintes.

Questionnaire. — Leçon. — 61. Qui appelait-on nobles ou seigneurs sous le régime féodal ? — 62. Que comprenait le peuple ? — 63. Qui appelait-on vilains ? — 64. Que savez-vous des serfs ? — 65. Où se dressait le château du seigneur ? — 2. Décrivez le château du seigneur. — 3. Parlez du pont-levis. — 4. Qu'était-ce que le donjon. — 5. Où étaient les cabanes des vilains et des serfs ? — 6. Que faisait le guetteur ? — 7. Que faisaient les assiégés lorsque la première enceinte était forcée ?

Devoir. — Dites ce que vous savez du donjon et du guetteur.

Cloves

[EUGENIA CARYOPHYLLATA]

The dried seeds we call cloves are harvested from the tree of the same name, an evergreen native of the Spice Islands that is such an avid consumer of water that nothing else can grow near it. Cloves have been put to medicinal and culinary use for millennia; they were particularly popular in medieval Europe for their strong scent.

Our Christmas tradition of decorating oranges with patterns of cloves to create an aromatic pomander dates back to Renaissance England. ¶ Clove is a critical element in many holiday treats, from cakes and cookies to pies and punch; medicinally, it remedies a malady brought on by an overabundance of these tasty desserts——oil of clove is a common cure for toothache.



Nasturtium

[TROPÆOLUM MAJUS]

Cheerful nasturtium, which now grows uncontrollably in most sunny climates, was once accounted an extremely rare and elegant plant. Native to the Americas, it took the Old World by storm when it was brought back by the early explorers. ¶ Nasturtium's generic name *Tropaeolum* is latin for "trophy," which evolved from an old legend that the plant grew from the blood of a dying Trojan warrior. Perhaps this tale is the source of the flower's symbolic meaning of patriotism.

With its delicate scent and vibrant red, orange, and yellow flowers, nasturtium is a splendid garden flower, though it tends to invade all nooks and crannies when left to its own devices. Nasturtium leaves and seeds are eaten in some parts of the world, and the peppery flower petals can be found sprinkled generously over salads in restaurants that advocate complete garden consumption.



Ginger

[ZINGIBER OFFICINALE]

A native of Asia, ginger is now grown throughout the tropics and in the Americas. This exotic, heat-loving plant grows to a height of three to four feet and bears glamorous white, yellow, and purple flowers, but it is the dull brown root, or rhizome, that is most treasured. Its delightfully spicy aroma has become the scent of Christmas, and its pungent, warming taste is essential to such favorite desserts as gingerbread as well as being a key ingredient in all sorts of delicious curries, drinks, and vegetable dishes.

A major trade item between Europe and Asia for centuries, ginger was much revered in the West for its curative properties. ¶ Because the rhizome has the shape of the human digestive tract, early medicos assumed that it was a remedy for stomach disorders; coincidentally——and luckily for their patients——it is. Employed as an aphrodisiac by Madame du Barry, it was said to drive even the sluggish Louis XV to the heights of lust.

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