

A lush garden scene with various herbs and plants in the foreground and a tree on the left. The background shows a grassy field and more trees under a bright sky.

Herbs of the Bible

by Angela Myers

“Wars have been fought, trade routes established, lives sold and cultures, countries and businesses begun all in the name of the plants we call herbs.”

– Herbs of the Bible by Maribeth King

Before the Internet, before television or radio—even before books—men and women passed knowledge from generation to generation in the form of folklore. Many of their stories were about the healing powers of the plants that grew in the fields and forests around them.

Then came the age of science.

“That information was lost,” said Michael King. “All that tradition was gone. We have so much to bring back. Our ancestors were very smart and appreciated what God put into nature for them.”

Michael, president of Mari-Mann Herb Co, Inc., located at the north end of St. Louis Bridge Road in Decatur, and his brother, Joel, have spent their lives studying the supplements and nutraceuticals sold through the business started by his mother, Maribeth, in the early ‘70s.

Maribeth, who passed away in 2008, was an enthusiastic gardener. Through the Decatur Garden Club, she started studying and growing herbs, then using them in unique ways in her cooking. The surge of interest in natural medicines in the ‘60s and ‘70s offered her an opportunity to forge a career in a field she had learned to love.

Before long, the entire family was involved in her business, a tradition that continues today. Michael gravitated toward management and education, while Joel inherited their mother’s culinary interests. As chef for Mari-Mann Herbs, Joel uses many of her recipes, including one for unique rosemary cookies that is an all-time favorite of customers. The rubs sold in the store are his creations, and he continues to improve and add to the recipes and other culinary creations.

Surrounding the store at the end of St. Louis Bridge Road are acres of herb gardens. In the spring, the herb gardens are beautiful and aromatic with plants and blossoms that attract bees and visitors.

“We grow the herbs that grow best in this part of the country,” said Michael. “We don’t get into the exotic herbs.”

But herbs that grow in the Midwest are exotic to customers who don’t live in the Midwest, and Mari-Mann Herbs has had visitors from as far away as Japan and Russia as well as from neighboring communities. And herbs that are exotic to Midwesterners are purchased elsewhere to be sold in the store, which also carries a comprehensive variety of natural foods and foods for those with special dietary needs.

Michael, descended from a long line of ministers on both sides of his family, has followed in their footsteps as well as those of his mother. He is a lay speaker with the First United Methodist Church, taught the Disciples class for five years, and is widely read in comparative religions. He tailors his lectures on herbs and nutraceuticals to fit the interests of his audiences, from medicinal to flavorful, but his and others’ favorite is probably the lecture on Herbs of the Bible.

“And it’s another way to spread the Word,” he said.

Although Michael has added his own extensive research to the material in his lectures, the foundation comes from his mother’s booklet, still for sale at the store. According to the booklet, a surprising number of herbs are mentioned in the Bible, and the first mention of a specific herb takes place right away. In Genesis, Rachel asks Leah for some of the mandrakes brought to her by her son. Mandrakes were thought to be an aphrodisiac and aid for conception. (Although Rachel was Jacob’s favorite wife, she had difficulty bearing children. Her sister, Leah had four sons before Rachel gave birth to Joseph. Later, Rachel died in childbirth with her second son, Benjamin.)

A very important herb first mentioned in Exodus is hyssop, which was dipped into the blood of sacrificed lambs and used to mark the doors of the Hebrews to prevent the death of their firstborn during the first Passover. Hyssop is a very interesting herb. The Hebrew word translated as hyssop is “Ezov,” which means “a holy cleansing or purifying herb.” Hyssop is a powerful cleansing herb, said Michael, and penicillin mold has even been found on its leaves, so it made sense for “Ezov” to become “hyssop” in the King James version of the Bible. But hyssop doesn’t grow in the Middle East.

Yet oregano, which grows all over the Middle East, isn’t mentioned in the Bible at all. Research has confirmed that the herb called Ezov is actually wild Mediterranean oregano, used since 3000 B.C. as a cure for heart and lung disease and for healing infections. Modern science continues to prove the potency of oregano in controlling pathogens, but before you go pour oregano into your stew, you need to know that the oregano we use for cooking is actually sweet marjoram, and there are more than 60 species of oregano. You will need expert advice to identify true wild Mediterranean oregano, even when it appears as an ingredient in nutraceuticals.

Coriander, one of the most ancient herbs, is mentioned in Exodus, where manna is compared to the coriander seed. Romans combined it with vinegar




and used it to preserve meat. Its oil was used as a mild sedative, and its leaves are the cilantro familiar to those who love of Middle Eastern food.

Garlic is said to have caused the first strike in history when Egyptian workers refused to work until their allotment of garlic was increased. Modern research had proved it to be a powerful antibiotic and to help control cholesterol. Garlic, leeks, and onions, all thought to help ward off colds, are mentioned in Numbers.

Rue, anis, dill, fennel and mint were used for tithing according to Matthew and Luke. Mint grows wild in ditches and along the banks of streams in Palestine, and today there are more than a thousand varieties. Besides its value as a flavoring, pennyroyal mint deters ants and fleas, and spearmint deters mice. Other herbs used as insecticides were rue, bay leaves (which prevent weevils in flour) and the artemisias such as mugwort and wormwood.

Mustard, mentioned in Matthew (“...smaller than all seeds. But when it is grown, it... becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in its branches.”— Matthew 13:31–32) and worn by countless Christians to represent how little faith is required to move mountains, has been in use since prehistoric times. In the first century, Pliny listed forty remedies with mustard as the chief ingredient. It was frequently used in plasters or rubs for soreness.



Partnering for Purpose and Progress

Since 2009, Busey and its associates have given more than \$1 million and countless volunteer hours to make a positive difference in our communities. Busey's commitment to improving the quality of life for its customers, associates & area citizens by promoting volunteerism and community involvement began with its founding in 1868.


Visit busey.com to learn more about *The Busey Promise*.

Busey

DECATUR: 130 N. Water St., 217.424.1111 • 202 E. Ash Ave., 217.425.8381
2505 N. Water St., 217.424.5111 • 2070 S. Mt. Zion Rd., 217.864.2300

MT. ZION: 1120 State Hwy. 121, 217.864.2386

SHELBYVILLE: 200 W. Main St., 217.774.5515

 Member FDIC busey.com

Spikenard, the aromatic oil used by Mary to anoint Jesus in Matthew and Mark, was used in the burial process. Myrrh, given to Jesus by the Wise Men, also was used in preparations for burial as well as to dull pain. Gall was the juice of the opium poppy, which even now gives us the potent opiate painkillers. Frankincense is probably the oil God tells Moses to bring to Him and is directly mentioned in Leviticus. Frankincense and myrrh are aromatic gum resins.

Rosemary, a member of the evergreen family, is a strong antioxidant. In Biblical times, garments were spread over rosemary plants to dry after being washed, and a story is told that the previously white-flowered rosemary got its lavender blossoms when Mary hung her cloak on such a bush to dry—on the way to Bethlehem in one version and on the way to Egypt in another. One variety retains its white blossoms as a reminder of its former state. Also, rosemary boiled in water makes an antiseptic solution for cleaning.

Fibers of the flax plant are the most ancient of all textile fibers, used to make the fabric we know as linen. Jesus' swaddling clothes and burial wrappings were woven of linen. Meal made from flax seeds was used as a poultice, and linseed oil is a laxative and is used today to make paint and varnish.

Costmary, also known as Bible leaf, was infused to make a sweet water for the final rinse of linen for fragrance and as an insect repellent. The name Bible leaf comes from its use in Colonial times as a bookmark in Bibles and prayer books because of its ability to repel paper-eating creatures like silverfish. It also was used for menstrual cramps and to ease childbirth.

Maribeth's booklet "Herbs of the Bible" and Michael's lecture include many more of the herbs and much more detailed information than this small sample about how plants and herbs were used by our ancestors and what modern science has discovered.

"It's new and different," said Michael, "but old and ancient."

Anyone who would like to learn more by touring the Mari-Mann Herb Gardens or by booking Michael to speak to their group can make arrangements by calling Mari-Mann Herbs at 217-429-1555. For more information about the company or store, visit www.marimann.com.

