



Blue/purple flowers

Rosemary

*There's rosemary, that's for remembrance,
Pray you, love, remember...
William Shakespeare*

This month we commemorate Anzac Day; we wear fresh sprigs of rosemary for remembrance. Those of us who have made the pilgrimage to Gallipoli have seen rosemary growing wild there, those who have visited our War Memorial in Canberra will have noticed the rosemary hedges surrounding the building. A sacred herb in ancient times, rosemary, rich in myth and symbolism, important at weddings, funerals and many other festivities, is still regarded with much affection now, especially on Remembrance Day.

An evergreen shrub of the mint family, native of the Mediterranean region, the plant gets its name from 'ros' (dew) and 'marinus' (sea), after its habit of growing in coastal areas. Many legends surround the plant. One is that it had white flowers until Mary, fleeing to Egypt with the baby Jesus, threw her blue cape over a rosemary bush while they had a rest besides it, the flowers then turned forever into the colour of her blue garment and the plant was

referred to thereafter as the 'Rose of Mary' (even if the blooms look nothing like a rose but are rather more like the mint flowers to which rosemary is related!). Another legend compares the growth of the plant to the height of the Saviour and declares that the rosemary bush will never grow taller than His height. Interestingly enough, rosemary is said to live for 33 years, Christ's life span. Rosemary leaves are narrow and spiky with a dark green upper surface and pale grey downy underside. When rubbed, they give off a scent with camphor-like overtones and a hint of pine.

The ancients were familiar with rosemary, which had a reputation for improving memory. On this account, it became the emblem for remembrance and fidelity. Students in ancient Greece wore garlands of rosemary around their necks, or braided them into their hair to keep their memory alert during exams, which is where rosemary's other common name 'herb of crowns' comes from. Others would place rosemary in their pillow the night before to enhance memory during sleep. At funerals, mourners carried fresh sprigs of rosemary to be cast on the coffin when it was lowered to the grave. As a sign of fidelity for lovers, sprays of rosemary were often included in the bride's bouquet and guests were sometimes presented with a bunch of rosemary, gilded and tied with silk.

Rosemary was also used to decorate churches and banquet halls at festivals or as incense in religious ceremonies (an old French name for rosemary was 'incensier'). It was an old custom to burn rosemary in sick chambers. During the second World War, rosemary and juniper berries were used in French hospitals to sterilise the atmosphere and to limit the spread of infection. It has been recorded that Napoleon used to drink rosemary tea infusion, bathe in rosemary water and burn rosemary to purify his room. Rosemary was also placed under one's pillow to prevent nightmares and was hung outside homes to thwart evil spirits, it was also put between linen to repel moths, a practice still in use by some today. An old remedy for gout, muscular aches and pains calls for rosemary oil. This oil was the active ingredient of the celebrated 'Hungary water or Budapest water' that helped to restore the limbs of the apparently paralysed Queen Elizabeth of Hungary.

But it was not only among the apothecaries and the celebrants that rosemary had its share of fame for its many virtues. Remember the old saying 'where rosemary flourishes, the lady rules', which basically means rosemary was very much a herb in the kitchen where the lady ruled (Salutations to gentlemen chefs and kitchen husbands!). Its flavour complements roast meat, poultry, fish, vegetables and pastries such as bread and scones. Italian cooks certainly use rosemary to the best advantage. Their porchetta (roast pork) – a whole young pig stuffed with large amounts of rosemary and garlic – is a gourmet's delight. And there are rosemary sausages, butter, honey, jelly, salad oil and vinegar etc., and rosemary tea infusion makes a soothing nightcap.

Rosemary is also well known as a tonic and cosmetic herb. The oil is a very popular ingredient in hair tonics and shampoos, in antiseptic mouthwash and gargle. It is said that an infusion of dried rosemary leaves and flowers combined with borax makes one of the best shampoos, it will benefit the scalp, add lustre to the hair and impart a delightful fresh

fragrance, its regular use on the scalp is believed to help preventing dandruff and premature baldness.

A very hardy plant, considered potentially invasive in some parts of the world, rosemary is very easy to grow from cuttings, it can live on poor soil, withstand severe lack of water for lengthy periods. Most plants have blue to purple flowers, but there are cultivars with pink or white flowers, double flowering and gold-edged leaves; they all have the same fragrant qualities albeit their different hued blossoms and/or foliage.

From magical blessings, love potions, health remedies, kitchen herbs, baked goods and processed meat products, shampoo, moisturising cream, soap, etc. to building hedging and garden companion plants, rosemary, the sacred ancient herb, the 'Rose of Mary', special in ancient times and still much appreciated in today's modern living.



Golden leaves



Pink flower