

THE STORY OF PLANTS: ROSEMARY

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AS I APPROACHED ELBA, I could not see one plant from the ferry; I could only see the green pelt covering the island's rocky slopes. But I could remember Elba's rich and fragrant flora, Spanish lavender (*Lavandula stoechas*), curry plant (*Helichrysum italicum*), and my favorite, rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*). Elba, largest in a chain of seven islands making the Tuscan Archipelago, has long been separate from the Italian mainland. The rosemary, growing on these islands and on neighboring Corsica, has a unique trailing habit and has parented innumerable cultivars now available world-wide.

The genus *Rosmarinus* consists of two species, the circum-Mediterranean *R. officinalis* and the lesser known *R. eriocalyx* endemic to southern Spain and northern Morocco. Rosemary, in the Lamiaceae or mint family, shares the characteristic two-lipped flowers, leaves in opposite pairs, and economically important oils with lavender (*Lavandula* spp.), basil (*Ocimum* spp.), and oregano (*Origanum* spp.) all used for millennia in the kitchen and the apothecary.

Revered by the Greeks for its memory enhancing abilities, scholars wore garlands of rosemary around their heads to help them study. Rosemary, carried at weddings or braided into the bride's hair, is said to ensure fidelity, and at funerals rosemary placed in the coffin is said to ensure the departed is remembered. Modern scientists have found the oils in rosemary to contain over a dozen antioxidants, which may aid in reducing the symptoms of Alzheimer's. These same oils have made it useful as a digestive aid, meat preservative, insecticide, anti-bacterial, and even a mood elevator. But most of us, along



Elba rosemary (Daniel Mount)

with the ancients, love rosemary for the wonderful flavor it imparts to roasted meats.

Native to coastal habitats, the name *Rosmarinus* reflects this predisposition, *ros* meaning "dew" and *marinus* meaning "of the sea." Long associated with feminine deities, it was once sacred to the goddess Aphrodite, said to have risen from the waves of the Mediterranean. The blue flowers are flecks of the foam she rose on. Later the myth was transferred to the Virgin Mary, who in flight to Egypt took refuge under a rosemary bush, and spreading her blue cloak across the bush, changed the once white flowers to blue. Thus the common name rose of Mary. In Europe it is still believed that where rosemary thrives the woman is the head of the household. I'm sure many rosemary bushes were axed by husbands unwilling to acknowledge that fact.

In October, the rosemary had already begun to bloom blanketing the mountains of Elba with a blue haze,

buzzing with bees. I wondered, as I walked through thickets of it, at the variability of form and color. Flowers ranged from opalescent white to deep azure. Some grew stiffly like boxwood, others as flowing as Aphrodite's tresses. This variability has given rise to nearly 100 cultivars. Most, not hardy, remain unavailable to us. The hardiest cultivar 'Arp' seems to have lost its popularity to the much prettier 'Tuscan Blue'. Also popular, is the prostrate rosemary (*R. officinalis* 'Prostratus') which is more susceptible to winter wet and cold than the upright cultivars. When you see the island home of its progenitors you wouldn't question why. Rosemary's love for sharply draining, alkaline soils, and the thinnest of mists off the Mediterranean make it an unlikely candidate for the Northwest garden. Yet there are some amazing specimens here, where flowering begins in the first warm days of late February and seems to peak in April, when it makes a radiant backdrop to tulips and daffodils.

I have grown rosemary for years now with erratic results. Sometimes the healthiest plants in an ideal location have succumbed to winter. Yet in my Zone 6 garden near Carnation I had one plant survive heavy soil and flooding for three years in a row. Its inevitable death prompted me to grow rosemary in containers on the deck, remembering its rocky place of origin. 🏠

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