

The Herbalist

By Dr. Kathy Girard, URI Master Gardener



Rosemary (*Rosemarinus officinalis*; Family Labiatae)

Rosemary, a tender perennial, has bushy erect growth, evergreen, needlelike leaves, and blue flowers at the tip...and a wonderful pine/camphor scent. It can grow up to 6 inches per year and can reach a height of 6 feet in a greenhouse or in the Mediterranean region where it is native. In New England it will most likely reach a height of 2-4 feet.

Legend has it that rosemary will grow to 6 feet in 33 years, which mimics the height and the age of Christ at his death. Rosemary then stops its vertical growth in deference to Christ. This herb has been used extensively in religious traditions as a symbol of fidelity and remembrance. Rosemary sprigs were often included in wedding bouquets and presented to guests. The sprigs were also thrown into graves at funerals as a pledge that the deceased loved one would not be forgotten. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Ophelia, in mourning her beloved's madness, says:

"There's rosemary, that's for remembrance;
pray you love, remember...."

Rosemary can be grown from seed but it has a very low percentage of germination. The simplest method of propagation is to take 5-inch cuttings from the top of plant in August, strip the leaves from the lower 3 inches, dip the stem in rooting hormone powder, and insert it in clean sand. Cover the cuttings with a glass or a baggie and they should be rooted in four to six weeks.

Outdoors, rosemary should be planted in an area with good soil in full sun and normal rainfall. Plants will thrive all summer, but must be brought indoors if temperatures dip below freezing. Indoors, rosemary prefers a cool environment; if the roots or tips are allowed to dry out, it will die. Frequent spraying of the foliage and sitting the pot on a saucer of pebbles will increase humidity and be beneficial to the plant.

This herb is easy to preserve. As soon as the sprigs are removed from the plant, they begin to dry. Place sprigs in a brown paper bag for several weeks; then strip the needlelike leaves from the stems and store in an airtight container.

Rosemary is a venerated culinary herb and can be used in roasting meats and vegetables. Since the taste is pungent it should be used sparingly. It has also been used to make tea, and when flavored with honey and lemon is said to alleviate headaches and aid sleep. A combination of rosemary, lavender, and lemon peel in a sachet will repel insects...or add some crushed rosemary to a pan of water on the stove to enjoy the piney scent!