

Tarragon



QUICK FACTS

Tarragon is a hardy herbaceous perennial of the large genus *Artemisia* in the family *Asteraceae*. It may have originated in central Asia. The species *dracunculus*, known as Russian or Siberian tarragon, reproduces by seed. The far tastier clone we now call the cultivar 'Sativa' originated centuries ago and has been considered so worthwhile that it has been propagated by root divisions and cuttings ever since. The seed of *A. dracunculus* 'Sativa,' rarely produced, is almost always sterile. *Dracunculus*, meaning "little dragon," may refer to the coiled and twisted roots, or to the fact that tarragon was thought to cure the bites and stings of venomous beasts and mad dogs.

Description

French tarragon grows from old roots each year to 2 to 3 feet in height. It is many-branched and gets semi-woody. The leaves are smooth, dark green, narrow, and pointed on the upper parts of the plant and may be 3 inches long on mature plants but are usually shorter. They taste like anise and can numb the tip of the tongue when chewed. In contrast, Russian tarragon has lighter green leaves that are not so smooth, and their flavor is grassy and without the anise hint or the power to numb. It follows that seed-grown plants should be avoided and only plants grown from cuttings or divisions should be propagated and bought. The taste test will always distinguish one from the other.



Artemisia dracunculus Photo: commons.wikipedia.org

Culture

French tarragon should be planted in a sunny, dry spot as it does not like wet soil. After the second or third year the whole plant can be lifted in spring when new leaves begin to show, and cut into portions that have roots and at least one stub of last year's growth. The center of the root mass begins to die out anyway, so this is a good way to renew the plant and multiply it. The method is the same used for chrysanthemums. New plants should be spaced 1½ to 2 feet apart

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and pruned often to promote branching. In fall the branches should not be cut down to the ground, or new soft growth may start too early in early warm spells. A winter mulch to keep the roots frozen after the ground is hard is helpful. Since tarragon needs several weeks of winter dormancy and is subject to fungal diseases, it does not do too well in the deep South.

Uses

The leaves are popular in French cooking, usually in mild-flavored dishes, such as chicken and fish dishes, eggs, sauces, salads and pickles. Tarragon is indispensable in sauce Béarnaise, and makes a fine flavoring for vinegar or mustard. In traditional folk medicine, tarragon has been used for digestive problems and intestinal worms, and externally for joint pain. It is mentioned in the PDR for Herbal Medicines but is not classified as an approved herb by the German Commission E, and some sources do not recommend it for pregnant women. Tarragon is also used as a commercial flavoring and in perfumery.

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Tarragon



QUICK FACTS

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