

Tulsi: Holy Basil

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Known as holy basil or Indian basil, tulsi is a distant relative of the basil plant used in western cooking. In ayurveda tulsi is revered as “the elixir of life”, a great adaptogenic herb with numerous healing powers. However, its properties go beyond physical healing into the realm of divine invocation. Tulsi is worshiped by Hindus each morning and evening as the embodiment of the goddess Tulsi-devi.

The word “tulsi” means “the incomparable one”. Though many herbs are revered in India, the healing powers of tulsi were recognized by the ancient rishis, giving it a special status as one of the most sacred herbs in India along side Soma and the Lotus. An herb only reaches this level of prestige when known to contain not only a broad range of medicinal actions, but spiritual healing properties as well, inspiring devotion among those who consume it.

Tulsi has a long and impressive list of healing actions, explaining its reputation as a panacea. Most notably, it is an adaptogen, providing protection from the effects of stress by supporting the naturally occurring adaptive responses of the body-mind to physical and psychological challenges from the environment. The protective effects of adaptogens like tulsi serve to prevent the onset of many more illnesses than they actually heal. And an ounce of prevention is worth more than a pound of cure. Tea made of tulsi leaves can be taken while healthy to maintain overall well being, improve stamina and endurance, and to cultivate sattwic (spiritual) energy.

Medicinally, tulsi strengthens the immune system, increasing antibody production with its antibiotic, antiviral and antifungal properties. It is used in treating such common ailments as colds, headaches, digestive disorders, inflammation, heart disease, and various forms of poisoning and malaria. It is an important constituent of ayurvedic cough syrups and expectorants and in digestive remedies. Its properties are pungent, bitter, warming and is used in ayurveda to treat Vata and Kapha disorders. Though it does increase Pitta, it has the special power (prabhava) of reducing fever.

The spiritual properties of tulsi are glorified by all Hindus, particularly those who worship Lord Vishnu. In fact, an Indian household is considered incomplete if it lacks a growing tulsi plant, usually housed in a meter-high terracotta planter known as Tulsivrindavan. At these miniature courtyard temples, women across India worship Tulsi-devi as an embodiment of the Mother Goddess in an elaborate ceremony (puja) involving prayer and songs of praise, while pouring holy water onto her roots. Tulsi-devi is invoked to open the heart and mind, increase prana (life energy), and to foster greater love, devotion, faith, compassion and clarity. She is said to clear the aura and provide divine protection.

Tulsi-devi is so revered that beaded necklaces (mala) are worn with slices of tulsi stem to provide spiritual protection and nourishment, while bringing lightness and consciousness into our being.

Ancient Vedic scriptures such as the Puranas describe many stories of tulsi and Tulsi-devi. Brahma is said to reside in it's roots, Vishnu in the stems and leaves, and Shiva in the flowering tops. Legends say that tulsi is especially sacred to Lord Vishnu, who was very fond of Tulsi-devi. Thus the three varieties of tulsi are known as Krishna tulsi, Rama tulsi and Vana tulsi; Krishna and Rama being the human incarnations of Lord Vishnu.

The word 'vana' means “forest”. “Vrinda” is another name for the goddess Tulsi-devi, and the presiding deity of the forests of Vrindavana, the birth place of Lord Krishna. She is an extension of Radha the beloved consort of Krishna. It is said that even today nobody can spend the night in this forest and return to narrate the visions. It is believed that Krishna and Radha appear in this forest eternally.

Those who wish to enjoy this sacred herb may do so as a simple tea infusion. A few companies are providing tulsi in teabag form. Try to buy organic where possible and enjoy.