

I II

# COMPENDIUM OF SYMBOLIC AND RITUAL PLANTS IN EUROPE

A UNIQUE REFERENCE WORK



I TREES & SHRUBS  
II HERBS

MARCEL DE CLEENE - MARIE CLAIRE LEJEUNE

# COMPENDIUM OF SYMBOLIC AND RITUAL PLANTS IN EUROPE

*Botanical*  
*popular names, habitat, description*  
*Cultural*  
*rituals, mythology, symbolism, magic, popular customs,*  
*popular beliefs, fairytales, sagas, legends*  
*Uses*  
*herbalism, popular remedies, cosmetics, agriculture,*  
*industry, crafts, home, garden and kitchen*



*A modern reference work on the part played by herbs,  
shrubs and trees in mythology and religious  
and profane rituals and the symbolism that derives from them.  
Many customs that 21<sup>st</sup>-century man finds perfectly normal once  
had a far deeper significance.*

*It is an academically sound survey of the knowledge  
of ritual plants over the centuries, taking a broad view,  
plus a critical look at how correctly plant species  
are named in the literature.*

# A UNIQUE REFERENCE WORK

Many things that seem normal to 21<sup>st</sup>-century man once had a deeper significance. Few people realize that many of our customs grew out of age-old rituals or things that had great symbolic value to our ancestors. There is, however, no full modern survey of the part played by plants in mythology and in religious and secular rituals, and the symbolism that derives from them. All this information lies scattered throughout the specialist literature: either one particular group is examined, such as biblical plants or hallucinogenic plants, or else plants with some folkloric value (often local). In addition, these works are usually not very critical from a botanical point of view (which plant is actually being referred to?). This compendium comprises more than a hundred chapters on trees and shrubs (vol. I) and herbs (vol. II) that have played or still play a part in rituals of some sort. It is based on a thorough study of the literature and evidence from librarians, historians, ethnologists, archaeologists, anthropologists and medical practitioners. The authors opted to restrict themselves to ritual plants that are either indigenous, or have become established in Europe (e.g. the Lime and the Rose), or which are exotic but have ritual uses in Europe (e.g. Myrrh, Incense and Rice).

This book provides an academically well-founded survey of the knowledge of ritual plants over the centuries, in a broad view, with a critical look at the correctness of the

plant species named in the literature. It is written in layman's terms but with plentiful references for those who wish to further explore the terrain. It soon became clear that ritual plants were often considered to have special medicinal and/or magical powers. This is why they are frequently mentioned in ancient and mediaeval herbals or live on in European superstitions and popular customs and sayings. For this reason particular attention is focused on

the use of ritual plants in European herbal medicine, magic, superstition and folklore. In order to broaden the scope of the compendium even further, the authors have also covered applications of ritual plants in pharmacy, cosmetics, industry, agriculture, crafts, cooking, etc.

The thread running through this compendium is man's innate fear of losing his grip on his own environment and the ensuing escape into all manner of spirits and strange powers. It is a fear that has probably always existed, but can be clearly felt in the present

turbulent and uncertain transitional period to the umpteenth 'new age'. What is more, at a time of major environmental pollution, it is a good thing to reflect on the age-old bond between man and nature and the plant kingdom in particular, and to recognize its deeper symbolism. The best justification for the publication of this compendium is the hope that this understanding may in some way contribute to a recovery of the lost harmony with nature.



*Why are willow, box, yew, holly, laurel and olive twigs consecrated on Palm Sunday and taken home as protection for the house or stables?*

*Why do red roses symbolize passionate love?*

*Why are the ceilings of old houses decorated with plaster roses?*

*Why was a wreath of Rosemary and Carnations laid before the altar at the memorial service for the 1987*

*'Herald of Free Enterprise' disaster at Zeebrugge in Belgium?*

*Why are Scottish Apple Trees surrounded by White Heathers?*

*Why are sticks still used to knock walnuts off the tree?*

*Why is the Myrtle Bush grown near doorsteps?*

*Why did Princess Anne's wedding bouquet include a sprig of Myrtle?*

*Why is the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil portrayed as an apple in Western iconography?*

*Why is incense burned in churches?*

*Why do we say 'touch wood', 'unberufen' (German), 'toucher du bois' (French), 'hout vasthouden' (Dutch) and so on?*

*Why is the Grape-vine, with grain, the symbol of the Eucharist, and bread and wine the body and blood of Christ?*

*Why is a maypole sometimes put on the roof of a house?*

*Where does the tradition of kissing under the Mistletoe come from?*

*What is the link between 'cupper' and 'Cypress'?*

*Why do Paris policemen still wear the emblem of the oak branch on their lapels?*

# THE AUTHORS



**MARCEL DE CLEENE** (1946)

*Studied at Ghent University, where he obtained his PhD in botanical sciences in 1975. In 1988 he was appointed Science Information Officer at the same university and in 1991 professor of Science Communication and Ethnology/Ethnobotany. He has written and co-written 130 publications, including four works for general readers, is a member of numerous international associations, and a member of the Steering Committee of the Association of European Universities Public Relations and Information Officers (EUPRIO). He headed three projects on bacterial rice diseases at the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines and was the coordinator of an EU study on the physical weathering and bioreceptivity of European building stones.*



**MARIE CLAIRE LEJEUNE** (1955)

*Graduated from Ghent University with an M.Sc. in botanical sciences in 1977. She has a passionate interest in music and folk dance, plays the violin and guitar and conducts the Cantilene choir in Zandvoorde, Ostend. Together with Marcel De Cleene she wrote the "Compendium van Rituele Planten in Europa", which was published by Stichting Mens en Cultuur, Ghent, 1999 (reprinted in 2000 and 2003).*

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8. Symbolic and ritual trees and shrubs

*Acacia, Mimosa*  
*Alder*  
*Almond Tree*  
*Apple Tree*  
*Ash*  
*Bay*  
*Beech*  
*Birch*  
*Box*  
*Cedar*  
*Cherry Tree*  
*Citrus Tree*  
*Citron, Grapefruit,*  
*Lemon, Orange,*  
*Pomelo, Shaddock*  
*Date Palm*  
*Elder*  
*Elm*  
*Fig Tree*  
*Grape-vine*  
*Hawthorn*  
*Hazel*  
*Heath/Heather*  
*Holly*  
*Incense Tree*  
*Ivy*  
*Juniper*  
*Larch*  
*Lime*  
*Mediterranean Cypress*  
*Mistletoe*  
*Mulberry Tree*  
*Myrrh Tree*  
*Myrtle*  
*Oak*  
*Olive Tree*  
*Peach Tree*  
*Pear Tree*  
*Pines, Spruces, and Firs*  
*Pistacia Tree*  
*Mastic Tree, Pistachio Tree,*  
*Terebinth*  
*Plane Tree*  
*Pomegranate Tree*  
*Poplar*  
*Red-cedar, Arborvitae*  
*Rose Bush*  
*Rosemary*  
*Rowan*  
*Sage*  
*Sweet Chestnut Tree*  
*Sycamore*  
*Tamarisk*  
*Thyme*  
*Walnut Tree*  
*Willow*  
*Yew*  
**9. Academic apparatus**  
*Iconography*  
*List of figures*  
*List of colour plates*  
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## II

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4. The symbolism of garlands and crowns
5. Famous herbalists and herbalist writings
6. The importance of ancient herbal know-how in contemporary medicine
7. Symbolic and ritual herbs

*Amaranth*  
*Anemone*  
*Basil*  
*Bear's-breech*  
*Broad Bean*  
*Celery and Parsley*  
*Cereals*  
*Barley, Maize, Millet,*  
*Oats, Rice, Rye, Wheat*  
*Chamomile*  
*Clover*  
*Columbine*  
*Cornflower*  
*Crown Daisy*  
*Daffodil*  
*Daisy*  
*Fennel*  
*Flax*  
*Grasses*  
*Henbane*  
*Hyacinth*  
*Hyssop*  
*Iris*  
*Fleur-de-lis*  
*Larkspur*  
*Lily-of-the-valley*  
*Lotus*  
*Sacred Lotus,*  
*Egyptian 'Lotus', etc.*  
*Madonna Lily*  
*Mandrake*  
*Marigold*  
*Mint*  
*Monk's-hood*  
*Mugwort*  
*Common Mugwort,*  
*Southernwood, Wormwood*  
*Mushrooms*  
*Fly Agaric*  
*Nettle*  
*Onion*  
*Chives, Garlic, Leek, Onion,*  
*Ramsons, Wild Onion*  
*Pea*  
*Perforate Saint John's-wort*  
*Periwinkle*  
*Pink*  
*Poppy*  
*Common Poppy, Opium Poppy*  
*Primrose*  
*Saffron Crocus*  
*Strawberry*  
*Vervain*  
*Violet*  
*Wild Pansy, Sweet Violet*  
*Woodruff*  
*Bedstraw, Lady's Bedstraw*  
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*Technical data*  
Format: 17 x 24 cm

*Volume I*  
about 888 pages, including extensive footnotes and bibliographic apparatus and an index of thousands of entries.  
Plus 139 drawings and 179 colour plates.

*Volume II*  
about 700 pages, including extensive footnotes and bibliographic apparatus and an index of thousands of entries.  
Plus 109 drawings and 136 colour plates.

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*The two volumes are contained in a sturdy box with printed paper overprinted in gold and covered with plastic foil.*

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Cris Brodahl

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Tel: 00 32 (0)9 245 37 43  
Fax: 00 32 (0)9 245 37 44  
[info@man-and-culture.com](mailto:info@man-and-culture.com)  
[www.man-and-culture.com](http://www.man-and-culture.com)