

## Parsley

*Petroselinum sativum* (Curled parsley)

*Petroselinum neapolitanum* (Italian parsley or flat leaf parsley)



*One of them handed out parsley,  
the symbol of clandestine abortion,  
which others put in their hair.*

*There were about four thousand of us, mostly women...*

-Simone de Beauvoir in *All Said and Done*, 1974

Family Umbelliferae

**Parts Used:** Seeds and essential oil.

**Medicinal Properties:** Diuretic, prevents kidney stones, emmenagogue, and carminative.

**Effects on the Body:** Stimulates menstruation and increases urine output.

**Abortifacient Action:** Contracts uterus and is embryotoxic.

**Contains:** Apiol (uterine tonic), myristicin (embryotoxin), and unidentified water soluble uterine contractors.

**Description:** Widely cultivated and well-known culinary herb, parsley is a short-lived perennial with a smooth erect stem and shiny dark green compound leaves. Small ribbed oval seeds follow tiny white umbel flowers. The curly-leaf variety grows to 12 in. (30.5 cm) in height and is best known as a garnish and favored in Britain. The flat-leaf variety, preferred in Italy, has a stronger flavor, is used like a vegetable, and grows to 3 feet (1 m) in height.

### Parsley Herbal Lore and Historical Use<sup>1</sup>

In ancient Greece, parsley was considered sacred. Parsley was dedicated to Persephone and used in funeral rites. Parsley was reputed to have sprung from the blood of an infant who was killed by the serpent that guarded the sacred grove of Zeus at Nemea.

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<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this book is to recapture information about historical approaches to self-induced abortion. Parsley has been included; however the reader must keep in mind that some deaths have resulted from the ingestion of apiol (parsley essential oil).

The baby was given immortality, renamed Archemorus, the forerunner of death. Homer related that chariot horses were fed by warriors with the leaves of the parsley plant. Greek gardens were often bordered with parsley and rue, symbolizing respectively the edge of death and grace, and were planted to banish evil. Parsley was worn in wreathed crowns and put on graves. In the Middle Ages, parsley continued its sacred stance; it was consecrated to St. Peter.

Through the ages, parsley was also known for its emmenagogal and abortifacient qualities. Folkloric reports of parsley used as an abortifacient are numerous and widespread, reaching across the Atlantic from Europe and Africa to the Americas.<sup>1</sup> Hippocrates documented that parsley was used to cause an abortion. Pliny the Elder (AD 23-79) said parsley was used to cause sterility. In medieval times, parsley was used as an abortifacient; women used the seeds to bring out their menstruation, however parsley seeds were thought to be inferior to other emmenagogal herbs.<sup>2</sup> Infusion of the top and root of *Petroselinum crispum* was utilized by Native American Cherokee as an abortive for “female obstructions.”<sup>3</sup>

The emmenagogal effect of parsley preparations is often attributed to a substance called apiol found in parsley seeds. Apiol is an organic chemical compound also known as parsley camphor. Apiol was discovered in 1715, by Heinrich Christoph Link who noticed greenish crystals forming while processing the essential oil of parsley. In 1855, Joret and Homolle documented the effectiveness of treatment of amenorrhea with apiol.<sup>4</sup> Apiol is

thought to 'cause a relatively safe abortion' in pregnant women if taken in small quantities,<sup>5</sup> however the deaths of some women trying to induce an abortion is attributed to the toxic properties of apiol.<sup>6</sup>

In the United States, apiol prescription by doctors as an abortifacient was widespread in the early 1900's. The First World War spread the knowledge of the use of apiol for abortion into Europe. It is estimated by some scholars that millions of women took apiol to produce abortion with few negative side effects and only a handful of deaths reported.<sup>7</sup> The use of apiol stopped when a highly toxic adulterated product containing apiol and triorthocresyl phosphate was introduced to the American market in the 1920's.<sup>8</sup> Now that other methods of abortion are widely available, apiol is no longer available in the United States; but apiol was recently produced and sold as an abortifacient in the Middle East and Mexico.<sup>9</sup>

Other components in parsley, not yet identified, are likely to have abortifacient activity. Parsley is known to have an oxytocic effect, stimulating the pituitary via the hypothalamus. Researchers in Bulgaria reported that water based extracts of parsley, which would have little to no apiol present, still have significant uterine stimulating effects.<sup>10</sup> In Russia a drug called Supetin, derived from parsley juice, is used to stimulate labor.<sup>11</sup>

Gathering: A detailed field guide should be consulted to gather members of the Umbelliferae family. Parsley is easily confused with its poisonous sisters: fool's parsley *Aethusa cynapium* and poison

hemlock *Conium maculate*. Parsley leaves may be gathered throughout the summer, as after they are cut back they readily grow back. Parsley seed is gathered when dry in late autumn. Parsley's roots are collected for medicinal purposes in the second year, in autumn or late summer when the plant has flowered.

Purchasing: Fresh organic parsley is available at some groceries and health food stores. Although any parsley can be used, flat leaf parsley has been shown to contain higher levels of essential oil than curly leaf parsley. Apiol is not widely available in the United States, but may be available in Mexico. Organic parsley essential oil is available for purchase at health food stores and online. The natural parsley essential oils in food have not shown abortifacient effects when eaten by pregnant women.<sup>12</sup> However, the German Commission E. cautions that larger doses of parsley seed oil than what is found in food preparations have the potential to produce uterine contractions.<sup>13</sup>

Preparation: Parsley is most effective when used as an emmenagogue in the first two weeks of gestation. Sometimes parsley tea is combined with the juice of lemon or high doses of Vitamin C (500 mg/ hour. up to 6000 mg per day, maximum six days). Vitamin C has been shown to have progesterone suppressive effects.<sup>14</sup> Parsley is occasionally combined with angelica. Parsley is sometimes combined with lemon and/or rue in abortifacient preparations.<sup>15</sup> Apiol is more effective when taken at small dosages.

Apiol is most effective when used in the first eight weeks of pregnancy.

Words to the Wise: Parsley contains psoralens, which can damage DNA and blister the skin when it is exposed to sunlight. Parsley should not be used by women with inflammatory kidney conditions, for parsley is high in oxalic acid. Occasional allergic reactions, photosensitivity, or mucous membrane irritations have been reported, especially with the essential oil when used internally. Parsley essential oil, or apiol, is an irritant to the body systems. If apiol is given in too high a dose or for too long, it can cause liver and kidney damage. Parsley also contains myristicin which is very toxic and is also one of the toxic substances in nutmeg. Parsley oil can contain potentially dangerous amounts of myristicin. Parsley oil, like nutmeg, can cause hallucinations, paralysis, and liver and kidney degeneration if taken in too large a quantity.



Watch for signs of Toxicity Specific to Parsley: Nausea, hallucinations, vomiting, vertigo, hives, paralysis, liver swollen and painful, urine scanty and darkly colored, and tremors.

## Parsley Dosage

Emmenagogual parsley infusion: Take one bunch fresh parsley rinse

clean, chop, and place in a glass container with a lid. Boil one quart of water, pour over herb. Cover and steep 20 - 30 minutes. Strain. Drink throughout the day. Parsley infusion can be taken for up to seven days.

Parsley pessary: A few sprigs vaginally inserted, replace every 12 hours.

Parsley root tincture: 1:5, 60% alcohol, 30 – 60 drops, up to three times a day.

Parsley fresh seed essential oil (Apiol): 5 – 15 drops (0.2 - 0.6 ml), two to three times a day, for up to five days.

## Parsley Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Nina L. Etkin, *Plants in Indigenous Medicine and Diet: Biobehavioral Approaches* (Routledge 1986), 45.
- <sup>2</sup> Paul of Aegina (Paulus Aegineta), *Libri medicorum* (Heiberg ed., I:276.), 3.61.5.26-28.
- <sup>3</sup> Paul B. Hamel and Mary U. Chiltoskey, *Cherokee plants and their Uses: A 400 Year History* (Sylva, NY: Herald Publishing, 1975), 47.
- <sup>4</sup> Joret and Homolle, *Jour. Pharm. Chim.*, (1855), 212.
- <sup>5</sup> Edward Shorter, *Women's Bodies: A Social History of Women's Encounter with Health, III*. (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 220.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> A. Austregesilo, "Acute Neuromyelitis," *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 83, no. 3 (1936), 343.
- <sup>9</sup> J. F. Morton, *Atlas of Medicinal Plants of Middle America*. (Springfield, IL: C.C. Thomas. 1981), 650.
- <sup>10</sup> Tsonev, I., L. Rainova & M. Penova, "Concerning the Uterine Effect of Parsley, *Petroselinum Sativum*. II." *Farmatsiya* (Sofia, 1967), 17, 39.
- <sup>11</sup> James A. Duke, *The Green Pharmacy* (Emmaus, PA, USA:Rodale, 1997), 362.
- <sup>12</sup> E. S. Kryzhanovskaya, "Effect of Flavoring Substances on the Bodies of Pregnant and Nursing Women," *Voprosy Pitania* 6 (1970), 130.
- <sup>13</sup> M. Blumenthal, ed., *The Complete German Commission E Monographs: Therapeutic Guide to Herbal Medicines* (Austin, TX, USA: American Botanical Council, 1998).
- <sup>14</sup> R. Ovcharov and S. Todorov, "[The Effect of Vitamin C on the Estrus Cycle and Embryogenesis of Rats]" (in Bulgarian). *Akusherstvo i ginekologija* 13, no. 3 (1974), 191-5. J.S. Vobecky, J. Vobecky, D. Shapcott, D. Cloutier, R. Lafond, and R. Blanchard, "Vitamins C and E in Spontaneous Abortion". *International Journal for Vitamin and Nutrition Research. Internationale Zeitschrift für Vitamin- und Ernährungsforschung. Journal international de vitaminologie et de nutrition* 46, no.3 (1976), 291-6.
- <sup>15</sup> Nina Lilian Etkin, Carole H. Browner, Bernard R. Ortiz De Montellano, Memory Elvin-Lewis, James A. Duke, Robert T. Trotter, Michael H. Logan, Maurice M. Iwu, Anne Fleuret, Dale E. Hammerschmidt, *Plants in Indigenous Medicine and Diet: Biobehavioral Approaches* (New York: Routledge, 1986), 40.