

מליסה – Lemon Balm – Melissa Officinalis

Calming, Sweet, Honeybee Herb

Two kinds of lemon balm grow in my garden – a tall aggressive kind that keeps competing with the roses, and a delicate, smaller one, mild enough to give to babies and use in salads and smoothies. Although for most herbs, I use the English rather than Latin name, ‘Melissa’ – which is also a name for a girl – seems to flow better than, ‘lemon balm.’ Perhaps, it is because melissa is a derivation of the Greek word for honeybee. The sweet fragrance of the leaves and its tiny whitish flowers attract bees. Therefore, growing melissa is an invitation for more bees, pollination and flowers.

Melissa is known to be a calming herb that reduces stress and anxiety, promotes sleep, calms the stomach and alleviates colic. Since lemon balm is one of the best herbs for treating most acute children’s diseases, I used it for my baby. After the students complained that teaching while bouncing a baby in the backpack was distracting, I had to leave my six-month-old with a babysitter. My poor attachment-baby had separation anxiety and wouldn’t stop crying, so I made a mixture of apple-juice and melissa tea to calm him. I’m sorry to admit that it proved ineffective. Not to depreciate from melissa’s medicinal value, which includes strong antibacterial and antiviral qualities, I have also had good results using the leaves of the hardier kind for polishing our wooden coffee table. With all of lemon balm’s versatile properties, are there any Torah teachings that relate to lemon balm?



Variant Blessings for Two Types of the Same Herb

When I showed my husband, the Rabbi, the two different types of melissa growing in our garden, he agreed with me that the blessing on their scent is different for each type. The stronger, tougher, bushy kind, which can grow to the height of a 2-year-old boy (2 ½ feet), is a hardy perennial. Despite my efforts to cut it down to keep it from taking over, it remains in our garden year after year. In addition, it has a hard woody stem.

Therefore, before enjoying its scent, the blessing is the same as the blessing for rosemary,

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה'שֵׁם אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא עֲצֵי בְשָׂמִים

Baruch Ata Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha'olam boreh atzei besamim

‘Blessed are You Hashem... Creator of fragrant trees.’

Yet, the smaller, delicate lemon balm has a soft stem, grows close to the ground like grass and usually does not make it through our tough winters. The blessing on its sweet lemony fragrance is therefore,

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה'שֵׁם אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בּוֹרֵא עֲשָׂבֵי בְשָׂמִים

Baruch Ata Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha'olam boreh isvei besamim

‘Blessed are You Hashem... Creator of fragrant herbs.’

I found it quite interesting that different types of the same herb could have different blessings. Although both have similar leaves and their fragrance strongly resembles the uplifting scent of lemon, the tougher type is more tart and acrid, while the milder type is sweeter. I enjoy smelling both kinds of lemon balm as I brush by them in my garden.

Emotional Healer, Mood Balancer and Mental Strengthenener

Lemon balm has been cultivated in the Mediterranean region for about 2000 years. For centuries, herbal writers have praised this calmative herb for its ability to balance feelings, and help resolve moodiness and melancholia. The Greek physician, Dioscorides, would apply lemon balm to scorpion or animal bites for its antibacterial properties, and then give the patients wine infused with lemon balm to calm their nerves. Lemon balm steeped in wine was used to lift the spirits since ancient times. It is still used today in aromatherapy to combat depression. It is associated with the energies of the moon and therefore helps balance emotions. It allows us to perceive our feelings without getting lost and wrapped up in them. The Muslim herbalist, Avicenna, recommended lemon balm "to make the heart merry." "...[Lemon Balm] causeth the mind and heart to be Merry...and driveth away all troublesome cares" (Culpeper, mid-17th Century). Lemon balm tea soothes emotional pains after a relationship ends. It also helps heal people suffering from mental or nervous disorders. Moreover, melissa is useful for individuals with a sound mind who need to keep their mental abilities in superior condition. Its sedative properties and pleasing scent make it a popular ingredient in herbal pillows to promote relaxation and sound sleep. Lemon balm may also be used as a bathing herb, by scattering its delightfully scented leaves over the water, or by pouring an infusion to mix with the bath. Today, lemon balm is often combined with other calming, soothing herbs, such as valerian, to enhance the overall relaxing effect.

Healing Herpes

Lemon balm is very effective for treating herpes simplex virus (HSV) both because of its antiviral properties as well as its ability to reduce the stress associated with herpes outbreaks. Essential oils made from lemon balm leaves contain plant chemicals called terpenes, which contribute to the herb's relaxing and antiviral effects. Studies suggest that topical applications containing lemon balm may help heal lip sores associated with herpes ([Schnitzler P1, Schuhmacher A, Astani A, Reichling J.](#)). In one study of 116 people with HSV, those who applied lemon balm cream to their lip sores experienced significant improvement in redness and swelling after only two days. Lemon balm "reduces the time needed to heal cold sores by roughly half," according to certified nutritional consultant Phyllis Balch in her book *Prescription for Herbal Healing*. For cold or herpes sores, steep 2 to 4 tsp. of crushed leaves in 1 cup of boiling water for 10 to 15 minutes. Cool. Apply tea with cotton balls to the sores throughout the day. I have treated my cold soars by sticking bruised melissa leaves to my lips.

Culinary, Cosmetic & Curative

Lemon balm, with its delicate lemon scent and flavor is true to its name: citrusy and fresh. Londoners of Elizabethan times would carry small bouquets, called 'Tussie Mussies,' filled with aromatic herbs and flowers, including lemon balm, which they would frequently sniff to disguise the horrible stench of their unsanitary conditions. Due to citronellal, lemon balm is also a mild mosquito repellent. As an excellent carminative herb, that relieves spasms in the digestive tract, lemon balm improves digestion. If you occasionally succumb to overeating, go straight to the garden and pluck a handful of the tender young leaves for tea. You can use fresh sprigs to top drinks and as a garnish on salads and main dishes. Fresh or dried leaves make a refreshing tea, either iced or hot. The taste of the leaves adds the perfect tangy note to fruit salads. For an eye-catching garnish, freeze small melissa leaves into ice cubes to serve in lemonade. Due to melissa's versatile properties, it is not surprising that French King Charles V of the 14th century drank lemon balm tea every day to keep his health and [Paracelsus](#) of the 16th century claimed lemon balm completely revitalizes the body and called it the "elixir of life."

Hands On:

Lemon balm can be enjoyed in a variety of ways – used in place of lemons to flavor meats, added to salads, and even included in baked goods. These lemon balm cookies are sweet with a touch of lemon flavor.

Lemon Balm Cookies

- ½ cup olive oil
- 1 cup brown sugar
- 2 eggs
- 1 Tbs. chopped fresh lemon balm (or 1 tsp. dried)
- ½ tsp. lemon essential oil
- 1½ cups flour
- 2 tsp. baking powder
- ½ tsp. sea salt

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees
2. Cream the oil and sugar together
3. Add the eggs, chopped lemon balm, and lemon oil. Mix well.
4. Slowly add in flour, baking powder, and sea salt.
5. Drop by the teaspoon onto a lightly greased cookie sheet.
6. Bake for 8-10 minutes.