

## כַּלְמִינְתָּה אֶפּוֹרָה – Lesser Calamint – Calamintha Incana



### Inconspicuous, Sorrow Soothing, Sweet Smelling Herb

When foraging for hyssop with my students, it is easy to mistake calamintha for hyssop. These two plants look almost identical in the spring, before the tiny pinkish, light purple or mauve flowers clearly distinguish calamintha from hyssop. Calamintha, more commonly known as calamint or gray calamint – a direct translation from the Hebrew – is smaller, low-climbing, with square stems and bears pairs of opposite leaves in the shape of small hearts. I would say that calamintha is more humble than hyssop. It droops inconspicuously, yet gracefully before spreading out. It needs very little room to grow, as it finds its way to spread out between rocks of the terrace and crevices and between steps and walls. In better conditions than my garden, it may be an erect, bushy plant reaching up to 30 cm (a foot) high. The main way to distinguish calamintha from hyssop is through its scent. The whole herb has a sweet and aromatic fragrance, and makes a pleasant tea. It grows by the wayside, in hedges, especially in dry places and may be cultivated as a hardy perennial. I was planning to uproot calamintha from my flower bed on the side of our driveway, since it seemed to have crowded out the presence of more desirable, vividly, colorful flowers. Yet, when I went to take some calamintha photos, I discovered how beautiful its delicate flowers actually are, if you only look closely. Calamintha's flowering season is quite long: from the month of Tamuz (June/July) until Chanukah. Moreover, Calamintha soothes sorrows, helps in recovery from emotional pain, increases joy and restores a bright outlook on life. Therefore, I decided to add some better soil and compost rather than uprooting my soothing companion, who chose my garden as its home.

### One of the Disputed Plants Qualifying for Bitter Herbs on Pesach

Calamintha belonging to the family Lamiaceae, is native to the northern temperate regions of Europe, Asia and America. It thrives in the Middle East including in Israel, where it favors the Galilee, the Judean Wilderness, as well as the mountains of Judea and Samaria. In the Talmudic discussion about the plants that qualify for bitter herbs on the Seder night, ethno-botanist and folklore researcher, Nissim Krispil identified Calamintha as one of the bitter herbs in debate:

תלמוד בבלי מסכת סוכה דף יג/א ואמר רב חסדא אמר רבינא בר שילא הני מרריתא דאגמא אדם יוצא בהן ידי חובתו בפסח מיתביה אזוב ולא אזוב יון ולא אזוב כוחלי ולא אזוב מדברי ולא אזוב רומי ולא אזוב שיש לו שם לווי אמר אביי כל שנשתנה שמו קודם מתן תורה ובאתה תורה והקפידה עליה בידוע שיש לו שם לווי והני לא נשתנה שמיהו קודם מתן תורה כלל:

Rav Chisda stated in the name of Rabina ben Shilo, A person fulfills his obligation on Pesach with bitter herbs of the marsh. It was objected: Hyssop but not Greek hyssop, or stibium-hyssop, or wild hyssop, or Roman hyssop or any kind of hyssop which has a special name. Abaye answered: Whatever had different names prior to the Giving of the Torah, the Torah makes specific mention of the general name to exclude the species with special names. However, the former [bitter herbs] did not have different names before the Giving of the Law at all. [All its varieties, therefore, are eligible]. (*Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 13a*)

The word אזוב יון/ezov yavan – translated as ‘Greek Hyssop’ may also be written in one word as אזוביון/ezovion meaning ‘lesser hyssop.’ Due to the similarity between hyssop and calamintha, with the latter being smaller, it makes sense to identify אזוביון/ezovion with calamintha incana. In Arabic as well, calamintha is called ‘small hyssop’ (Nissim Krispil, *Yalkut Hatzemachim*).

### Medicinal Properties of Calaminta

Calamint has been consumed as a medicinal herb since medieval times. The Israeli Arabs traditionally use it for eating and for healing. Tea from dried calamint leaves treats the digestive system and cures intestinal worms. Due to its expectorant properties, it is very beneficial for the respiratory system. Being aromatic, it also acts as a nerve tonic. Calamint leaves have a high content of menthol, making them effective for treating bruises and cuts. Most important of all, calamint strengthens the uterus, relieves menstrual cramps and greatly alleviates female ailments and difficulties in childbirth.

#### Remedy for Respiratory Problems

Calamint heals respiratory illnesses such as pneumonia, asthma, chest congestion and cough. Inhaling calamint vapor is the best way to treat respiratory ailments. Using it as a rub also alleviates bronchial problems.

#### Treats Colds and Fever

As a diaphoretic – increasing perspiration – calamint may be used to treat colds and fevers.

#### Soothes the Stomach

Calamint strengthens the stomach, relieves indigestion, flatulence, colic and strong stomach pains. Culpepper recommends calamint for relieving pain in the stomach and bowels, convulsions and cramps from cholera.

#### Kills Intestinal Worms

Culpepper recommends taking calamint with salt and honey for killing intestinal worms.

#### May Cure Snake Bites

The name of the genus, *calamintha*, is derived from the Greek 'Kalos' – 'excellent,' because of the ancient belief in its power to drive away serpents and the dreaded basilisk – the fabled king of the serpents, whose very glance was fatal. Dioskorides writes: "One root of *calamintha* in wine helps against snake bites."

#### Heals Gall and Spleen

Calamint is also helpful in all disorders of the gall and spleen, and cures yellow jaundice (Culpepper).

#### Heals Nervous Disorders

Drinking calamint tea treats depression, insomnia and other nervous disorders. Consuming calamint seeds may also be helpful to cure depression: "Calamint cureth the infirmities of the hart, taketh away sorrowfulnesse which commeth of melancholie, and maketh a man merrie and glad" (Gerard). Conserve made of the young fresh tops is useful in hysterical complaints.

#### Stimulates Mental Alertness

Calamint is very effective on afflictions of the brain, and can also make you more alert (Culpepper).

#### Heals the Skin and External Injuries

Calamint has been used extensively for skin ailments. Its leaves have a high menthol content, making them an effective remedy for bruises and cuts. "Calamint relieves those who have leprosy, taken inwardly, drinking whey after it, or the green herb outwardly applied, and that it taketh away black and blue marks in the face, and maketh black scars become well coloured, if the green herb (not the dry) be boiled in wine and laid to the place or the place washed therewith" (Culpepper).

## Herbal Remedies from the Judean Hills - Months of Av/Elul

### Female Ailments

Calamint is a woman's friend. Drinking it in tea provides substantial relief of menstrual pains, and supports the uterus. Massaging with calmint oil helps women who suffer from female ailments such as period problems. Calamint aids the birthing woman and significantly alleviates labor pains. A woman who has difficult labor should chew calamint leaves steeped in olive oil.

### Hands On

The leaves are the most useful part of calamint. The whole herb has a sweet, aromatic scent and makes a pleasant, cordial tea. For maximum effect, use infusion from the dried leaves collected at the peak of summer, when they are in their best condition. Crushed calamint leaves can also be rubbed on muscle cramps for providing subsequent relief. Traditionally, calamint has been used as a flavoring additive for wild game and other meats and to add a new taste to various foods.

### Calamint Tea

1. Pick calamint stalks with leaves.
2. Simmer 2 handfuls of green stalks and leaves in a liter of water for 3 minutes.
3. Strain with a fine strainer or a cotton cloth to ensure a bug-free tea.
4. Drink 4-5 cups a day.

### Calamint Vapor

1. Boil 4 heaping handfuls of green stalks and leaves in a liter of water.
2. When the vapor rises from the pot, creates a 'tent' with a towel above the head in order to draw the vapor.
3. This treatment lasts for up to 5 min.

### Calamint Simple Syrup

4-5 Calamint sprigs  
 1 cup honey or granulated Brown Sugar  
 1 cup Water

1. Add the water and sweetener to a medium sauce pot and bring to a simmer, stirring to dissolve the sugar (about 2 minutes).
2. Add the calamint, stir, and remove from the heat.
3. Allow the calamint to steep in the syrup for 2 hours as it cools to room temperature on the counter top.
4. Strain through a fine mesh sieve into a clean glass bottle. Store in the refrigerator for up 6 weeks. Yields about 1 cup.