

# Basil lore and legend

Basil supposedly derives its name from the terrifying basilisk, a half-lizard, half-dragon creature with a fatal piercing stare according to Greek mythology. The basil plant was considered to be a magical cure against the look, breath or even the bite of the basilisk when a basil leaf was medicinally applied. Although this story moved into the realm of fable, basil was still considered a medicinal cure for venomous bites. In keeping with its hostile status, later Greeks and Romans believed the most potent basil could only be grown if one sowed the seed while ranting and swearing. This custom is mirrored in French verbage where *semer le basilic* (sowing basil) means to rant. In Greece today, basil is readily grown as an ornamental and is used in certain religious rituals as a symbol of fertility.

In medieval times, it was thought that scorpions came from basil. Legend says to acquire a scorpion, one should place a few basil leaves under a flowerpot and after awhile, the pot would be lifted to expose a scorpion. This legend no doubt ties into the Greek lore of the basilisk.



In India, basil was consecrated to the Hindu god, Vishnu, whose wife Tulasi (also known as Tulsi) was said to have taken the form of basil when she came to earth. Hindus avoid harming basil plants, unless there is a good reason, and even then offer up prayers of forgiveness for touching a part of Tulasi. Interestingly enough, tradition requires the head of a Hindu be bathed in Tulasi water before being buried and a tulasi leaf is placed on the chest over the heart.



To the ancient Romans, it was a symbol of hatred, yet basil eventually became a token of love in Italy. Young maidens would wear a sprig of basil in their hair to profess their availability. In some regions of Italy, basil is known as "kiss-me-Nicholas." One can only wonder if the conflicting symbolism of basil in Rome is the origin of a love-hate relationship. The royal herb is regarded in a similar manner in Romania where if a boy accepts a sprig of basil from a girl, it means they are engaged to be married.