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**FILE: ■Rue (*Ruta* spp.)
■Rue – Traditional Spanish Medicine**

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RE: The Rich Ethnobotany of Rue from Spanish Traditions

San Miguel E. Rue (*Ruta* L., Rutaceae) in Traditional Spain: Frequency and Distribution of its Medicinal and Symbolic Applications. *Economic Botany* 2003;57(2):231-244.

Rue (*Ruta* spp.), a small, strongly aromatic shrub native to the Mediterranean, has been used in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, medicinally and magically, since ancient times. It is still a common part of European folk culture, especially in Spain and is also widely used in many Latin American countries. There are nine to ten species of *Ruta*. Three species (*R. augustifolia*, *R. chalapensis*, and *R. montana*) are native to the Iberian Peninsula, while another, *R. graveolens*, is cultivated there. Three more species are native to the Spanish Canary Islands (*R. oreojasme*, *R. pinnata*, and *R. microcarpa*), but San Miguel says that they have no known economic uses. Rue's strong smell has led to regional names such as "ruda pestosa" (stinky rue).

The medicinal and aromatic properties of rue come from its essential oils: rutin and methylnonilcetone. Rutin increases visual sharpness and benefits other visual problems and was used against edema, thrombogenesis, inflammation, spasms, and hypertension. It is an antihistamine, a vermifuge, and a rubefacient. Its bitter-eupeptic properties make it useful for stomach problems. On moist skin in direct sunlight, it leads to photosensitivity. The essential oil is a central nervous system depressant, and at high doses, a narcotic poison.

In this study, an attempt was made to locate and analyze all known data on traditional uses of rue in Spain, as cited in local or regional ethnobotanical works published before 2001 and from field informants. Fifty-nine literature sources yielded 594 notations on uses of rue, and local informants yielded 17 more. Information on the province for which each citation was found and whether the rue used was cultivated, gathered, or purchased were also considered. In most regions, where one or more species of rue grow wild, it is gathered rather than cultivated, especially *R. augustifolia* in the eastern provinces. *R. chalapensis* grows wild only in coastal regions, but is cultivated on the northern coast, where no rue grows naturally. The herb's seeds are sold commercially in Spain.

Rue is mainly used in Spain as a medicinal herb, with up to 80% of the data collected referring to human medical or veterinary applications, and 67% to human uses alone. It is also used for supernatural protection (9%), to repel pests (4%), and as a seasoning for food or liquor, a toxin, and ornamentally.

Rue is used to stimulate menstruation and, at concentrations which can cause maternal death, an abortifacient. It is not recommended for use by pregnant or nursing women, but is used, for both female humans and animals, to aid in delivery, or, after delivery, to hasten ejection of the placenta. The largest number of applications of rue relate to menstrual disorders, pregnancy, and childbirth. Abdominal pain, rheumatism, toothache, protection against evil eye, and protection against witches are the next most popular. For menstrual pain or delay, rue may be taken in an infusion, mixed with other herbs such as Roman chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*) or pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegium*), or with hot chocolate (from *Theobroma cacao*). Also, rue is used in ways which are only indirectly related to these areas of medical use. For example, related to pregnancy and childbirth, babies may be weaned by rubbing a twig of rue on the mother's breast; this is also used to treat nipples chapped by nursing.

Rue has also been used to treat eye and ear problems since ancient times; both Pliny and Dioscorides offered rue remedies for these organs. Today, the use of rue to treat eyes and ears is the most widespread use, reported from every province from which data was collected. In ancient times, rue was used to treat nervous ailments, and informants in scattered provinces mentioned rue as a sedative. It has been used in modern times to treat fatigue, depression, anemia, and to aid convalescence. While the ancients used rue for breathing and lung problems and cough, only three provinces reported these as recent uses. Other medicinal uses include treating snake and mosquito bites; as both an anaphrodisiac and an aphrodisiac; as a contraceptive; for weight loss; and to treat kidney stones, liver problems, high cholesterol, diabetes, cancer, heart disease, memory loss, measles, and smallpox.

Veterinary uses identified were mostly related to pregnancy and delivery, especially in cattle, but also in goats, sheep, and pigs. As with humans, the second and third most common veterinary uses are as a digestive aid and to treat wounds. Repelling skin parasites and eliminating internal parasites, treating eye infections, lung infections, and the sore throats of songbirds are also mentioned. One remedy for animals' painful joints and rheumatism is to wrap the joints in blankets soaked in a decoction of rue.

Besides medicinal uses, rue has long been used in Europe as a safeguard against supernatural evil. Many texts from the Middle Ages mention rue, some saying that witches used it in their potions while others claimed that witches feared its smell. Since rue was added to holy water, the English called it "herb of grace." Modern reports of rue's supernatural uses in Spain are especially prevalent in the Northern provinces. Crosses made of rue or bags filled with it are used to protect from evil influences. Oil in which rue has been fried may be used to draw a cross on a patient's body as part of a healing spell. In Galicia, fishermen use rue in a ceremony to bless and bring good luck to their nets. In some places, rue and laurel (*Laurus nobilis*) are blessed on Palm Sunday and then kept in homes to protect against thunderstorms and evil eye. In some regions, rue is used in love spells.

Essential oils of rue are used in the food and perfume industries. In the 1960s, Spain was its leading producer. While the early Greeks and Romans used rue to season olives, in modern Spain it is rarely used as a spice, and then mainly in the Mediterranean provinces. In Spain's southeast, it is often added to liquor. In other parts of Europe, it is a flavoring in drinks such as vodka or, in Italy, *grappa*. Elsewhere in the world, rue is sometimes used in drinks, including bitters and vermouth, and in baked goods, candy, and other foods.

— Mariann Garner-Wizard

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