

[The Medieval Garden Enclosed](#)

- [METMUSEUM.ORG](#)
- •
- [THE CLOISTERS MUSEUM & GARDENS](#)
- •
- [ABOUT THIS BLOG](#)

• Categories

- [Botany for Gardeners](#) (24)
- [Food and Beverage Plants](#) (41)
- [Fragrant Plants](#) (23)
- [Gardening at The Cloisters](#) (102)
- [Introduction](#) (2)
- [Magical Plants](#) (20)
- [Medicinal Plants](#) (71)
- [Medieval Agriculture](#) (8)
- [Plants in Medieval Art](#) (43)
- [The Medieval Calendar](#) (32)
- [The Medieval Garden](#) (8)
- [Uncategorized](#) (2)
- [Useful Plants](#) (14)

July 2011

S M T W T F S

1 2

3 4 5 6 7 8 9

10 11 12 13 14 15 16

17 18 19 20 21 22 23

24 25 26 27 28 29 30

31

[« Jun](#) [Aug »](#)

• Archives

- [May 2014](#)
- [December 2013](#)
- [October 2013](#)
- [September 2013](#)
- [August 2013](#)
- [June 2013](#)
- [May 2013](#)

- [April 2013](#)
- [March 2013](#)
- [February 2013](#)
- [December 2012](#)
- [November 2012](#)
- [October 2012](#)
- [September 2012](#)
- [August 2012](#)
- [July 2012](#)
- [June 2012](#)
- [May 2012](#)
- [April 2012](#)
- [March 2012](#)
- [February 2012](#)
- [January 2012](#)
- [December 2011](#)
- [November 2011](#)
- [October 2011](#)
- [September 2011](#)
- [August 2011](#)
- [July 2011](#)
- [June 2011](#)
- [May 2011](#)
- [April 2011](#)
- [March 2011](#)
- [February 2011](#)
- [January 2011](#)
- [December 2010](#)
- [November 2010](#)
- [October 2010](#)
- [September 2010](#)
- [August 2010](#)
- [July 2010](#)
- [June 2010](#)
- [May 2010](#)
- [April 2010](#)
- [March 2010](#)
- [February 2010](#)
- [January 2010](#)
- [December 2009](#)
- [November 2009](#)
- [October 2009](#)
- [September 2009](#)
- [August 2009](#)
- [July 2009](#)
- [June 2009](#)
- [May 2009](#)
- [April 2009](#)
- [March 2009](#)
- [February 2009](#)
- [January 2009](#)
- [December 2008](#)
- [November 2008](#)
- [October 2008](#)
- [September 2008](#)
- [August 2008](#)
- [July 2008](#)

- [Subscribe \(RSS\)](#).



« [Holy Vervain](#)
[Mite versus Mite](#) »

Friday, July 8, 2011

Welcome to the Beer Garden



Hops (*Humulus lupulus*), considered today to be crucial to beer brewing, were not commonly used until the fifteenth century. Before that time, brewers added different herbs, such as alecost (*Tanacetum balsamita*), to their beer to improve its flavor. Several of these medieval brewing herbs can be found in Bonnefont garden.

Ale is made of malte and water; and they the which do put any other thyng to ale then is rehersed, except yest, barme, or godesgood, doth sofystical theyr ale.

Andrew Borde, [The fyrst boke of the introduction of knowledge](#), 1452

Beer was a staple drink for medieval Europeans, as it provided much-needed calories to the often undernourished population and was cleaner and safer to drink than water. Then, as now, beer was made by brewing malted barley in boiling water to make sugars more available for yeasts to consume ([see an image of Jorg Prewmaister](#) tending his brew in a page from a fifteenth-century German manuscript, Amb. 317.2). This sugary, malty potion, known as “wort,” eventually becomes beer after the yeasts eat the sugars, releasing carbon dioxide and alcohol as byproducts of fermentation. On its own, wort is fairly flat in flavor, so brewers add additional ingredients, such as hops and spices, to enliven a beer’s taste.

The particular taste that is familiar to beer drinkers today comes from [hops](#), which provide the beverage’s desired aroma, flavor, and clarity. In fact, many people recognize hops as the key ingredient in the production of good beer. (For more information about hops, see [He-Hop, She-Hop](#), October 1, 2009.) But it wasn’t until the fourteenth century that hops became a standard brewing ingredient in Europe, and they didn’t take off in England until the fifteenth century. Before then, medieval brewers relied on garden herbs to excite and invigorate their beer, which yielded a much different brew from the hopped beer we drink today.

Alecost, or costmary ([Tanacetum balsamita](#)), was the favorite herb of medieval brewers before the introduction of hops. Its leaves were added to wort at the end of the brewing process in order to clarify, flavor, and preserve beer, and to add body and improve the beer’s head. During the Middle Ages, alecost was

a well-known aromatic herb and was among those strewn on floors to animate rooms with a spicy, sweet scent. The minty aroma of alecost was likely sought after by brewers to add a complex bouquet to their beer. As a medicinal herb, alecost was used by medieval people to treat intermittent fever and chest pains. These medicinal functions may also have been imparted to alecost beer.



In addition to alecost, ground ivy (*Glechoma hederacea*) and stinging nettles (*Urtica dioica*) numbered among the many herbs utilized by medieval brewers to add flavor and flair to beer.

The leaves of ground ivy (*Glechoma hederacea*) found their way into medieval beer as a flavoring ingredient. Like alecost, ground ivy also served to clarify and preserve beer. It was thought that the addition of the herb to beer would help to clear a person's head of "rheumaticke humours flowing from the braine" (John Gerard, *The Herball, or Generall Historie of Plants*, 1597), and it was generally understood to act as a purifying tonic. [For those interested in experimenting with ground ivy as a brewing herb, it is readily found throughout the United States (see the [U.S.D.A. Plants database](#)).] Ground ivy was sometimes included with sweet gale (*Myrica gale*), yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), and wild rosemary (*Ledum palustre*) in an herbal mixture known as [gruit](#). A fairly standard brewer's additive for flavor and aroma in the Middle Ages, gruit is seeing some resurgence in popularity among specialty brewers today (see www.gruitale.com for more information).

Among their many other functions and uses, the young leaves and shoots of the stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*) were also added to medieval brews to add bitterness. These same parts of the herb, extremely rich in vitamins and minerals, were also cooked and eaten as greens. It's important to boil nettles before use to remove the stinging hairs that give nettles their reputation. (See "[Grasping the Nettle](#)," April 28, 2011.) Nettle beer is still brewed commercially in some parts of the United Kingdom, although its designation as beer [has been disputed](#) by some. In the Middle Ages, both ground ivy and nettles were used medicinally to relieve headaches. Perhaps they were added to medieval beer in order to prevent the pains that can follow overindulgence.

Once hops were introduced to brewing, hopped beer became terrifically popular, so much so that the Duchy of Bavaria adopted the [Reinheitsgebot](#), the Bavarian Purity Law of 1516, which stipulated that the ingredients used in the brewing of beer would be limited to barley, hops, and water. Some breweries claim to adhere to these guidelines to this day. While hopped beer is the popular favorite among modern drinkers, curious brewers today can re-create [medieval herb beers](#) to get a taste of the staple beverage of the Middle Ages.

??Bryan Stevenson

Bryan Stevenson is a summer intern in the Garden Department at The Cloisters. He is interested in cultural history, public education, and natural history, and enjoys brewing at home.

Sources:

Anderson, Frank J., ed. ???Herbals through 1500,??? *The Illustrated Bartsch*, Vol. 90. New York: Abaris, 1984

Bessette, Alexandre. *Gruit Ale & Unhopped Beers*, <http://www.gruitale.com/>

Bremness, Leslie. *Herbs*. New York: Dorling Kindersley, 1994

Eden, Karl J. "History of German Brewing," *Zymurgy*, Vol. 16, No. 4, 1993, quoted in ???Reinheitsegebot: Germany Beer Purity Law???: <http://www3.sympatico.ca/n.rieck/docs/Reinheitsgebot.html>

Freeman, Margaret B. *Herbs for the Medieval Household*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997

Hartley, Dorothy. *Lost Country Life*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1979

Newman, Dan. "Brewing Botanicals." Reprinted with permission from *Brew-Ha-Ha*, 12 September 1999: <http://www.calferm.org/edu/misc/botanicals.htm>

[ShareThis](#)

Tags: [Achillea millefolium](#), [Add new tag](#), [ale](#), [alecost](#), [barley](#), [beer](#), [brew](#), [bryan stevenson](#), [costmary](#), [Glechoma hederacea](#), [ground ivy](#), [gruit](#), [hops](#), [humulus lupulus](#), [Ledum palustre](#), [malt](#), [Myrica gale](#), [Reinheitsgebot](#), [stinging nettle](#), [sweet gale](#), [Tanacetum balsamita](#), [Urtica dioica](#), [wild rosemary](#), [wort](#), [yarrow](#)

This entry was posted on Friday, July 8, 2011 at 1:12 pm and is filed under [Botany for Gardeners](#), [Food and Beverage Plants](#), [Fragrant Plants](#), [Medicinal Plants](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. Responses are currently closed, but you can [trackback](#) from your own site.

Comments (3)

1. [Giancarlo Annese](#) Says:
[July 11, 2011 at 4:10 pm](#)

Nice post! Is there any evidence of these herbs being used with or alongside hops anywhere? I wonder how quick the transition to hops was and if there were any attempts to combine hops with the already established brewing herbs.

2. [Bryan Stevenson](#) Says:
[August 2, 2011 at 1:49 pm](#)

Thanks for your comment, Giancarlo! I have not been able to find any evidence of herbs and hops being used together in the brewing of beer in the Middle Ages, but that does not mean that they were not. The transition to hopped beer took some time, so it is entirely possible that herbs and hops were both included in some medieval brews. The earliest evidence of the use of hops in brewing comes from Bavaria in 736, where the Reinheitsgebot would later become adopted in 1516. So you can see that it took some time before adding hops to beer became accepted as standard brewing practice! Great question!

3. [Lynn Chase](#) Says:
[May 23, 2012 at 8:14 pm](#)

Fascinating article! I have a question that I am hoping you can answer, since you are a home brewer, please?

Alecost ... "Its leaves were added to wort at the end of the brewing process" ...
At the end of boiling the wort? Or at the end of the fermentation process?

Also curious to know what process results in "malted" barley?

Thanks so much!

I hope to visit the beer garden very soon!

Comments are closed.

[Home](#) | [Hours and Directions](#) | [FAQs](#) | [Press Room](#)

[Contact Us](#) | [Terms and Conditions](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Career Opportunities](#) | [Facility Rental](#) | [Site Index](#)

Copyright © 2000–2011 The Metropolitan Museum of Art. All rights reserved.
1000 Fifth Avenue New York, New York 10028

☺