

An Herb Society of America Fact Sheet

Angelica

Angelica archangelica (angelica)

Angelica atropurpurea (American angelica, Purple angelica, Alexanders)

Angelica polymorpha* var. *sinensis (Chinese angelica, dong quai)

Angelica gigas (Korean angelica)



Angelicas are biennials or short-lived perennials belonging to the *Apiaceae* (parsley family), and are related to carrot, parsley, and the aromatic seed plants dill, caraway, cumin, anise and fennel. The species ***A. archangelica***, a biennial, originated in Northern and Central Europe. The plant has an ancient history of use as a charm against contagion, spells and enchantments and as a cure-all. Old pre-Christian beliefs about its magical power have been absorbed into the Christian context, including an association with some archangelic patronage, hence its species name.

Description

Angelica forms a basal clump of large three-sectioned leaves, borne on clasping leafstalks, which may be 2 to 3 feet tall in the first (sometimes also the second) year. In the second (sometimes the third) year it will send up a tall bloom stalk, usually 4 to 6 feet but occasionally up to 10 feet tall, creating a majestic appearance. The stalk is hollow, ribbed and 2 inches in diameter. At midsummer the flowering parts of ***A. archangelica*** appear wrapped in a papery sheath, which opens to show tiny greenish-white flowers in large club-like heads (the umbels typical of the family) up to 6 inches across. The flowers are followed by ribbed green seeds that turn brown as they ripen. All parts of the plant are fragrant, and the flower nectar attracts bees. ***Angelica atropurpurea*** grows wild in North America from Newfoundland to Delaware and West Virginia, Illinois to Wisconsin, preferring wet bottomlands and swamps. The stem base is tinged with purple as its species name suggests. ***A. polymorpha* var. *sinensis*** grows to 2.5 to 5 feet and is native to East Asia. ***A. gigas***, which is marketed as Korean Angelica, is similar to ***A. archangelica***, but is purple in all its parts.

Angelica archangelica

Culture

Angelicas are propagated by the fresh seeds, which can be allowed to self-sow. Late summer sown seedlings will make good root growth through much of the winter, as long as they do not dry out. They can be transplanted only in the young seedling stage, and planted 3 feet apart on center. Angelica requires shade in the hottest part of the day, and abundant water, although soil should also be well-drained. It prefers neutral to slightly acid soil with plenty of organic matter. ***A. archangelica*** and ***A. atropurpurea*** are hardy to zone 4, but ***A. polymorpha* var. *sinensis*** is only hardy to Zone 9.

Uses

Angelica was considered for centuries to be a powerful protective herb against evil spirits, witchcraft and disease, including the plague. Parkinson, in the 17th century, considered it a major medicinal plant. Roots and leaves are used as a digestive stimulant, and the root and rhizome of ***A. archangelica*** are approved by the German Commission E for digestive disturbances including flatulence and mild gastrointestinal spasms. American Angelica was widely used medicinally by North American Indians. The species most used in Chinese

herbal medicine is ***A. polymorpha var. sinensis***, which is considered an important tonic. Some sources recommend against the use of medicinal angelica preparations during pregnancy.

Roots, stalks, leaves and flowers of ***A. archangelica*** are edible. The stalks are candied for confections and cake decorations. Leaves are added to cooked fruit dishes, soups, stews, fish or poultry. The essential oil of the root and seeds is used as a vanilla-like flavoring in commercial liqueurs, ice creams and candies.

Warnings! 1) Any of the angelicas may cause skin photosensitivity or dermatitis due to the presence of furanocoumarins. 2) They must be identified carefully in the wild because of resemblance to other members of the family *Apiaceae*, which are poisonous, especially poison hemlock (*Conium maculatum*).

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