Sweet Woodruff

Galium odoratum



Height: Up to 30cm

Spread: Infinite

Suitable for: Shade and most soils but preferably moist, ground cover.

Summary: Woodruff is a low growing and spreading herbaceous perennial with attractive whorls of leaves up the stems. It flowers in late spring and the delicate flower heads are made up of lots of tiny white florets with a sweet scent.

More information:

Sweet woodruff is quick to establish and an ideal ground cover herb for planting under trees and shrubs. Ideally it prefers a moist rich soil but will grow quite happily in the dry shade under trees and in the lee of walls. It spreads by runners in much the same way as mint. The scented white flowers appear in late April or May and it looks pretty flowering with tulips and other late spring bulbs.

The dried foliage has a sweet scent, a cross between newly mown hay and vanilla. The aroma is due to coumarin which becomes stronger as the leaves wilt and dry.

There is much historical folklore surrounding sweet woodruff.

- It is recorded as being used as long ago as the 1300's as a strewing and fragrancing herb. It was used as part of a filling for mattresses and as perfumed wreaths, garlands and sachets. A pillow stuffed with sweet woodruff will promote restful sleep.
- The wreaths and garlands were hung in churches to represent humility.
- Medieval soldiers carried woodruff in their helmets as it was believed to bring success in battle, and by the same token to bring victory to athletes.
- Woodruff was thought to attract prosperity, and when enclosed in a leather sachet or wallet the owner was immune to all harm.
- Woodruff has several medicinally active constituents, and has been used in the past to counteract blood clotting, as a tonic tea and to treat abdominal pain, headaches and migraine. Externally it was used a compress for varicose veins and phlebitis.

Sweet woodruff is still used today as a room freshener, in pot pourri and scented drawer sachets, where it also acts as an insect repellent. Both the leaves and roots can be used for making dye.

Sweet woodruff is also a culinary herb.

Traditionally it is used in Germany where sprigs of flowers are added to white wine punches to celebrate the festival of May Day. The flowers can be added to all summer drinks and also to salads. Out of the flowering season the crushed sprigs of new leaves can be added to flavour drinks in the same way.

Sweet woodruff vodka is quick and easy to make.

- Fill a screw top bottle with woodruff leaves and cover with vodka.
- Leave in a dark place for 2 - 3 days to flavour.
- Strain into a clean bottle and serve either chilled or at room temperature - to taste.
- Flowers or flower buds can be used but these need less time steeping as the flavour is stronger.

Strawberries and woodruff are in season at the same time and they have a particular affinity with each other, the flavours compliment together beautifully.

- Halve 750g strawberries and lay in a shallow dish. Add a handful of freshly gathered woodruff sprigs and half a bottle of dry sparkling wine.
- Cover with clingfilm and chill for 2 hours.
- Just before serving, remove the sprigs of woodruff and stir in a handful of

woodruff flowers and the remainder of the wine to give it some fizz!

This is a lovely dessert for a special summer occasion