

Dictamus



Dittany of Crete *Origanum dictamnus* or [Το Δίκταμο τις Κρήτης](#) is a small ground covering herb found only in the rocky mountainous regions of the island of Crete in Greece.

This rock-loving hardy little bush has rounded leaves, tough exterior and colonises in hard places. Known for its healing properties, this little tiny plant is the stuff of legends going back for centuries, becoming myths.

It is known by many different names such as *Dictamnus creticus*, dittany, diktamo, eronda, Crete dittany and Cretan dittany, hop majoram and winter sweet.

In Cretan dialect it is known as Ο Έρωντας τις Κρήτης or Erondas, which roughly translates as 'love', which is actually a derivation from the word 'eros' which is one of the Greek words for love and the Greek God of love, sexual desire and fertility. This is because the herb was associated with love since the ancient times, it is said to be an aphrodisiac and traditionally given to newly weds to ignite their passion.

Aphrodite is said to have used it, and Hippocrates prescribed it. Its full medical value is still being researched, but from the oral and written history it is clear this is a unique healing herb.

It is mentioned in the writings of Homer, Aristotle, Evripides, Theophrastos, Virgil, Plutarch, Dioskourides and Galinos.

Its other healing uses are many and varied and when we speak to our grandmother *yiayia* she says it is "**very strong, very strong and good for the stomach.**" It can be used in a poultice for application on wounds, used for menstrual cramps and for digestive disorders.



Origanum dictamnus, the **dittany of Crete**, **Cretan dittany** or **hop marjoram**, is a tender [perennial plant](#) that grows 20–30 cm high. It is known in [Greek](#) as *δίκταμο* (*diktamo*, cf. "[dittany](#)") or in Cretan dialect *έρωντας* (*erontas*, "love"). It is a therapeutic and aromatic plant that grows wild only on the mountainsides and gorges of the Greek island of [Crete](#). It is widely used for food flavouring and medicinal purposes, in addition to featuring as an ornamental plant in gardens.

This small, [lanate](#) shrub is easily recognised by the distinctive soft, woolly covering of white-grey hair on its stems and round green leaves, giving it a velvety texture. Tiny rose-pink flowers surrounded by brighter purple-pink [bracts](#) add an exuberant splash of colour to the plant in summer and autumn.

Origanum dictamnus is a many branched plant with discoid to ovate, grey-green leaves that are sited in pairs opposite each other. The slender arching stems and lanate leaves are covered in a velvety white down and are 13–25 mm in size.

The flowers are pale pink to purple and have a deep lilac corolla with many deep pink coloured overlapping bracts. The colourful flowers forming a cascade of elongated clusters are in bloom in the summer months. The flowers are hermaphrodite, meaning they have both male and female organs, and are pollinated by bees attracted to their scent and bright colour.

Said to symbolize love and to be an [aphrodisiac](#), only the most ardent young lovers scrambled on mountainsides and the deep gorges of Crete gathering bunches of the pink blooms to present as love tokens. There are numerous deaths reported throughout the centuries by collectors of this magical herb.

Even in recent times, the collection of dittany of Crete was a very dangerous occupation for the men who risked life and limb to climb precarious rock faces where the plant grows wild in the mountains of Crete. They were named *erondades* (love seekers) and were considered very passionate men to go to such dangerous lengths to collect the herb.

Dittany of Crete has always been highly prized; it is gathered while in bloom in the summer months, and is exported for use in pharmaceuticals, perfumery and to flavour drinks such as [vermouth](#) and [absinthe](#).

In [Ancient Greece](#), [Hippocrates](#) prescribed plant cures to aid all manner of ailments, and considered dittany of Crete useful for [stomach aches](#) and complaints of the [digestive](#) system and as a poultice for healing wounds, as well as inducing [menstruation](#).

The Greek philosopher [Aristotle](#) in his work *The History of Animals* (612a4) wrote: "Wild goats in Crete are said, when wounded by arrow, to go in search of dittany, which is supposed to have the property of ejecting arrows in the body."

The Greek scholar and philosopher [Theophrastus](#) agreed with Aristotle about the healing properties of dittany of Crete. In his work *Enquiry into Plants*, he noted that dittany was peculiar to Crete, and that it was "said to be true, that, if goats eat it when they have been shot, it rids them of the arrow".

Other scholars of Ancient Greece and later have made reference to dittany, but probably referred to *Dictamnus albus*, known as false or white dittany.

Today, the wild, naturally grown dittany of Crete is classed as "rare" and is protected by European law so it does not become extinct. The cultivation now centres on Embaros and the surrounding villages, south of Heraklion, Crete, and is used to make herbal tea and for use in natural beauty products.

