

The Dioscorides Garden Project in Athens

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On Saturday, April 9, 2024, a public groundbreaking garden event to establish The Dioscorides Garden took place on the iconic grounds of Zappeion, a historical park in the center of Athens featuring a palatial building built in the late 1800s for the first Olympics in Athens, as well as Roman archaeological remains from approximately the 3rd century CE.

The Dioscorides Garden showcases plants significant to ancient Greek medicine and history as documented by the Greek medical botanist Pedanius Dioscorides (40-90 CE) in his influential medical text, *De Materia Medica* (Περὶ ὕλης ἰατρικῆς). His textbook described approximately 600 plants for more than 1,000 traditional medicines, and was hand-copied and extensively referenced by physicians and herbalists for 1,500 years. Centuries after it was written, this celebrated herbal reference would become the basis of European and Western pharmacopoeia.



More than 30 participants joined the event on a beautiful spring day in Athens. Parents and children worked together to prepare the garden beds and plant 35 medicinal herbs significant to ancient medicine. Attendees included landscape architect Simon Rackham, who helped plan the design of the garden, along with his daughter; a local Girl Scouts troop; local and international herbalists; and families interested in a wholesome nature activity together.

Many of these plants in the garden remain key plants in culinary and herbal traditions and scientific research continues to affirm many of their ancient uses for modern therapies.

Some of the plants in the garden are easily recognizable for their popularity in Greek cuisine and garden landscapes, including oregano (*Origanum vulgare*), rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*), mint (*Mentha viridis*), sage (*Salvia fruticosa*), and thyme (*Thymus vulgare*). Other medicinal plants, including betony (*Stachys officinalis*), wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*), hyssop (*Hyssopus officinalis*), lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*), and yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), are not as commonly known.

Each of these plants played a role in ancient Greek medicine and continue to offer therapeutic benefits. Some of the plants also featured in Greek myths, customs, or historical moments. Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), for example, is named after the great Trojan War hero Achilles, who was reputed to have used the herb to staunch the wounds of his fellow warriors. The genus *Artemisia*, to which wormwood and southernwood belong, is named after the Greek goddess Artemis, who ruled over wild animals, hunting, and the moon. The genus *Melissa* (lemon balm) is the ancient and modern Greek word for honeybee, μέλισσα, and according to Dioscorides, “bees delight in the herb” (*De Materia Medica*, 3-118).

There are countless stories to be told for each plant from Greek antiquity. Our day at the Dioscorides Garden at Zappeion is yet another story that will continue to unfold and be a part of Greece's botanical heritage.

At the conclusion of the event, children were awarded a certificate of participation, and participants enjoyed snacks and refreshments. A webpage was created on The Greek Herbalist website to highlight the project and describe ancient uses for each herb according to Dioscorides' text. To learn more, visit: <https://www.thegreekherbalist.com/dioscorides-garden-athens>

