

TOBACCO PLANT

Common Names: Tobacco plant, nicotiana, flowering tobacco

Botanical Name: *Nicotiana alata*

Family: *Solanaceae*



The tobacco plant came from the Americas to Europe. In 1560 Jean Nicot, a French consul in Lisbon, “wente one daie to see the Prysons of the kyng of Portugall” and the keeper of the prisons gave him a plant “as a strange Plant brought from Florida.” Nicot planted it in his garden where, “it grewe and multiplied marveilously” and used it to cure a young man of an ulcer in his nose. Later Nicot applied it to the ambassador’s cook, who had “almoste cut of his Thombe, with a great Chopping knife,” and “from that tyme fourth the fame of that same hearbe encreased in suche sorte, that manye came from all places to have the same hearbe.”

The garden tobacco plant, *Nicotiana alata*, is closely related to the smoking tobacco, *Nicotiana tabacum*. Our garden plant is called *alata* (Latin for “winged”) from the way the leaf stalks are set onto the plant. When tobacco was introduced to Europe, it was brought “to adornate Gardeines with the fairnes therof, and to geve a pleasunt sight,” and so it became a medicinal plant and grown more for its healing power then its appearance. Nicholas Monardes named it after Nicot.

Today we grow nicotiana in our gardens mainly for its lovely fragrance, especially in the evening when huge white flowers open to attract night pollinators. If you are making a night garden, be sure to include it. It is a perennial, but it is usually planted indoors early and treated as an annual, although Victorians sometimes kept it as a perennial houseplant. The tobacco family hybridizes easily. John Gerard recommended giving the plant to “thy wounded poore neighbor.” Linnaeus was a heavy smoker and recommended smoking as a protection against infection. Infused tobacco leaves were used until well into the nineteenth century as an effective insecticide and pure nicotine is one of the most powerful plant poisons in existence.

Gardeners are still arguing about the best uses of the Tobacco plant. Victorian gardeners recommended that it should be planted along paths so that at dusk they could walk outside and enjoy its heavy perfume. Sage advice for today's gardeners, don't you think?

100 Flowers and How They Got Their names
by Diana Wells