

Cardamom

Cardamom originates in the monsoon forests of the Western Ghats in southern India. This area has even become known as the Cardamom Hills, and until just 200 years ago wild plants from these hills provided most of the world's supply of cardamom. It was once known as the Queen of Spices as it is one of the most expensive herbs in the World, surpassed in price only by saffron and vanilla.

Cardamom is a relative of the ginger family and comes in two varieties, namely the commonly used Elettaria, with light green coloured seed pods and the less known Amomum, with larger, dark brown pods, which is therefore also called black Cardamom. Cardamom has a strong, unique taste, with an intensely aromatic fragrance. Black cardamom has a distinctly more astringent aroma, though not bitter, with an unusual coolness similar to mint. Cardamom is best stored in pod form, because once the seeds are exposed or ground, they quickly lose their flavour.

Cardamom has a long history of medicinal use in Ayurvedic and Chinese medicine. In Chinese medicine it is found in the category of fragrant herbs, where it is used to stimulate the digestive system, aiding the transformation of food into energy while preventing the formation of phlegm. In Ayurvedic medicine extracts of cardamom seeds have been used as digestive aid and to treat skin conditions, stomach disorders, problems of the urinary system and food poisoning. An infusion of cardamom can be used as a gargle to relieve sore throats, which has led to its use in cough lollies.

Common applications for these uses around the home centre upon cardamom's ability to increase the digestive fire. It therefore may be utilised in a tea with fennel for infant colic, or ground with other aromatic spices such as cinnamon, clove, black pepper and ginger for adults in a delicious masala chai. Due to the high essential oil content which gives that unique aroma, most spices stimulate the digestion, but cardamom is one of the gentlest and may be used by even those with a sensitive stomach.

By increasing the digestive and metabolic processes spices such as cardamom also assist in resolving congestion and phlegm. In traditional systems of medicine phlegm is often said to originate in the stomach and GIT through poorly digested food, and by increasing the metabolic fire, (or 'agni' in Ayurveda), the phlegm is dissolved. Cardamom was therefore seen by old English herbalists as a 'cephalic', meaning it was a herb that cleared the head. This means it may be useful to try combining it with fresh ginger for head colds with congested sinus. In addition to head colds, due to its gentle nature and sweet flavour, it is also a useful remedy to use in children's coughs and colds, as ginger and garlic are often too strong, too spicy or just too smelly! Together with fennel and aniseed it makes a wonderful cough syrup, but for best results the tea should be sweetened with liberal amounts of good quality honey and drunk hot every hour or two.

Lastly, due to its stimulating action, Cardamom has a long reputation in India as an aphrodisiac. By heightening the senses and increasing circulation Cardamom can be used as part of a fertility program, but for best results it should be combined with saffron in a little honey sweetened almond milk. This may also be drunk after love making to rejuvenate and vitalise, especially for the man.

To get the best medicinal and culinary results from your cardamom, of course ALWAYS buy organic!

- The Barefoot Doctor