

Aframomum melegueta

[Synonyms : *Aframomum meleguetella*, *Amomum melegueta*]

MELEGUETA PEPPER is a reed-like shrub. Native to the west coast of Africa (particularly Ghana) it has orchid-like waxy, yellow-throated, pale purple flowers and pear-shaped, yellow or scarlet-orange fruit.

It is also known as *Afrika kakulesi* (Turkish), Alligator pepper, Ginny grains, *Graines de paradis* (French), Grains of Paradise, *Grani de Meleguetta* (Italian), Greater cardamom, Guinea grains, Guinea pepper, *Guineapfeffer* (German), *Khayrbûâ* (Arabic), *Malagettapfeffer* (German), *Malagueta* (Spanish), Malagueta pepper, *Malaguette* (French), *Malagvet* (Russian), Maleguetta pepper, *Mani guetta* (Italian), *Maniguette* (French), *Maniguette* (French), *Meleteti aframon* (Estonian), *Meleguetapfeffer* (German), Meleguetta pepper, *Paradicsommag* (Hungarian), *Paradieskörner* (German), *Paradijskorrels* (Dutch), *Poivre de Guinée* (French), *Qâqullah dhakar* (Arabic), and *Rajskiye zyorna* (Russian).

The plant has an aromatic smell and releases a pungent resin.

An essential oil is extracted from the seeds.

The plant was originally carried across the desert from the African west coast to the ports on the Tripoli coast in the Upper Niger. This used to be the ancient African empire of Melle and it was from this name that one of the common names for the plant Melegueta is derived – and no doubt the species name.

The spice is believed to have been used in the Old World (Africa, Asia, and Europe) as American Indians used the *Capsicum* family in the New World. Many of the African tribes relied upon melegueta pepper in various roles, not only as a spice or condiment but also as an ingredient in medicines and veterinary applications, and as a constituent of perfumes. This is well illustrated by the fact that slavers ensured a sufficient supply aboard their ships when crossing the Atlantic to the Americas with their captives.

Medieval Europe served the oyster-shaped, small and hard, glossy, red-brown seeds as a culinary spice and an alternative to pepper (*Piper nigrum*). There are records of it being sold as *grana paradisi* in Lyons in 1245, when the Welsh physicians further north at Myddvai were calling it *grawn Paris* and melegueta pepper (grains of paradise) was one of the ingredients of *hippocras*, the spiced wine which was so popular in the 14th and 15th Centuries in Britain. Over the following centuries however the popularity of this spice gradually declined throughout Europe apart from a few further brief flurries of interest. One was in the 18th Century when it was being used to fortify wine, beer, spirits and vinegar. But during George III's (1738-1820) reign in England (which began in 1760) it was made illegal to add the spice to beer and anybody caught doing so was liable to a fine of £200 – a very large sum in those days. Another a short period in the 20th Century (during the 2nd World War) when France imported melegueta pepper to help brighten the diet which had become monotonous not least from the lack of Eastern imports. Today demand for human consumption, particularly as a condiment, is primarily confined to Ghana and Nigeria.

The seed oil is used today by the perfumery industry

The plant's traditional use in veterinary medicine particularly for cattle continues today.

Medicinally, roots have been used locally in treatments for some female disorders, and the seeds have not only been taken as an aphrodisiac and in remedies for dysentery but in conjunction with other ingredients they have been used in remedies for cholera. The seeds have also been used (with cola nut, *Cola acuminata*) to ease toothache. Extracts made from the stem have provided a treatment for tapeworm.