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### *Alpinia officinarum*

[Synonyms : *Kaempferia galanga*, *Kaempferia rotunda*, *Languas officinarum*]

**GALANGAL** is a perennial. Native to tropical south-east Asia generally, southern China and Iran it has small orchid-like, red-veined, white flowers.

It is also known as Catarrh root, *Chandramula* (Hindi), *Chandra mulika* (Sanskrit), *Chandu mula* (Bengali), *Chekur* (Malay), *Chikur* (Sundanese), China root, Colic root, East India catarrh root, East India root, Galanga (English, French, Italian, Spanish), *Galanga mineur* (French), *Galanga minore* (Italian), *Galangarot* (Swedish), *Galgantwurzel* (German), Galingale, Gargaut, *Gisol* (Filipino/Tagalog), *Grand galanga* (French), India root, *Kacholum* (Tamil), *Kachoram* (Telugu), *Kapur-kachri* (Marathi), *Katjulam* (Malayalam), *Kenchur* (Javanese), *Khulingan* (Arabic), *Kleiner Galgant* (German), Lesser galangal, *Nagar motha* (Urdu), *Pieni galanganjuuri* (Finnish), Resurrection lily, *Siam Ingwer* (German), Small galangal, and *Sugandha bacha* (Bengali).

Extracted essence from the underground stem has the fresh spicy scent of camphor.

Galangal is much smaller than greater galangal (*Alpinia galanga*).

*Officinarum* means ‘of the shop (usually the apothecary’s or herbalist’s)’. Certain plants used for medicinal purposes, whether of actual or legendary value, were kept readily available and acquired this name.

The name Galangal is said to be derived either from the botanical name of the Chinese plant *Alpinia galanga* from which the essence used to be extracted or from the Arabic word *Khalanjan*.

Galangal’s scent and taste drew it to the attention of the Crusaders and in the Middle Ages (when it was known in Britain as ‘garingal’ or ‘galingale’) it was in much demand as a culinary spice (as cloves (*Syzygium aromaticum*), nutmeg (*Myristica fragrans*) and ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) are more familiar to modern cooks). Once popular in European, Indian and Russian cuisine it is still recognized today as a seasoning in Indonesian and Malaysian national dishes, cakes and sauces. In Russia it has also been included as a flavouring in liqueurs eg. Nastoika, and it has been used to flavour Indian spirits as well. Several countries including Russia have added galangal as a flavouring to tea and used it in brewing beer. Today the powdered spice or the oil is used commercially by the food and drink industries in curry powder, exotic dishes, vinegars, pickles, soft drinks and liqueurs.

Apart from being smaller the dried roots of galangal have a much stronger scent than those of greater galangal (*Alpinia galanga*) and have long been considered to be superior in medicinal qualities as well. They have been an important export commodity for the Chinese. For centuries before the Portuguese intercepted traffic on the traditional Arabian trade routes at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century they were not only traded with other nations in the Orient but were also carried west on overland caravans.

In India it has been a component of perfumes and nowadays can be an ingredient in hair conditioners as well.

Today it is used commercially in perfumery and by the toiletry industry in talcum powders.

It used to be associated with more lethal uses in Malaysia. The non-toxic dried root was used as one of the elements of their arrow poisons (often with the extremely poisonous sap from

the upas tree, *Antiaris toxicaria*).

Today it is rumoured that hallucinatory qualities may be employed in Papua New Guinea. Galangal was given to horses by the Arabs as they were convinced this made them fiery – and it was an ingredient in veterinary medicines given to cattle.

It is said that the root first featured in European medicine after the writings of the celebrated Persian, Rhazes (c.850-923 or 932) and of the equally respected Arabian philosopher and physician, Avicenna (980-1037) had reached the European medical fraternity. According to many Rhazes must be celebrated as the Persian physician and alchemist lauded as the greatest physician of his time in the Arab world. For the Arabs the roots were prized as an aphrodisiac.

Medicinally, herbalists recommended the underground root for the treatment of vomiting, wind and fever, and as a snuff for catarrh and for seasickness. Today it is used primarily in Western medicine for treating oral diseases such as gingivitis and some skin cancers. In Asian countries generally it is taken to ease headaches and the pain of childbirth and in Chinese medicine it is turned to as a treatment for indigestion. An infusion of the leaves (or roots) is also used in local folk medicine to treat sore throats, rheumatism and eye disorders.