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Avena sativa

[Synonyms : *Avena algeriensis*, *Avena anglica*, *Avena byzantina*, *Avena byzantina* var. *thellungiana*, *Avena chinensis*, *Avena cinerea*, *Avena diffusa*, *Avena distans*, *Avena fatua* subsp. *macrantha*, *Avena fatua* subsp. *praegravis*, *Avena fatua* var. *sativa*, *Avena flava*, *Avena fusca*, *Avena fuscoflora*, *Avena georgiana*, *Avena georgica*, *Avena grandis*, *Avena heteromalla*, *Avena hungarica*, *Avena macrantha*, *Avena nigra*, *Avena nodipilosa*, *Avena orientalis*, *Avena pendula*, *Avena persarum*, *Avena podolica*, *Avena ponderosa*, *Avena praecocioides*, *Avena praecoqua*, *Avena praegravis*, *Avena pseudosativa*, *Avena racemosa*, *Avena rubra*, *Avena sativa* subsp. *byzantina*, *Avena sativa* var. *contracta*, *Avena sativa* subsp. *macrantha*, *Avena sativa* var. *nigra*, *Avena sativa* subsp. *nodipilosa*, *Avena sativa* var. *orientalis*, *Avena sativa* var. *praegravis*, *Avena sativa* var. *secunda*, *Avena shatilowiana*, *Avena sterilis*, *Avena sterilis* var. *algeriensis*, *Avena sterilis* var. *thellungiana*, *Avena tartarica*, *Avena thellungii*, *Avena trabutiana*, *Avena trisetata*, *Avena unilateralis*, *Avena verna*, *Avena volgensis*]

OAT is a cultivated grass. Probably derived from other species native to eastern Asia and southern Europe (*Avena fatua*, *Avena sterilis* or *Avena barbata*), it has creamy-beige flower spikelets.

It is also known as *Almindelig havre* (Danish), *Atiyav* (Sanskrit), *Aveia* (Portuguese), *Aveia-amarela* (Portuguese), *Avena* (Spanish), *Avena común* (Spanish), *Avena comune* (Italian), *Avena roja* (Spanish), *Aveno kultiva* (Esperanto), *Avoine* (French), *Avoine byzantine* (French), *Avoine commune* (French), *Avoine cultivée* (French), *Ceirchwellt* (Welsh), Common oat, Corn, Cultivated oat, *Dōsar* (Arabic), *Enbaku* (Japanese), *Futterhafer* (German), *Gandal* (Hindi), *Ganer* (Hindi), *Gemeiner Hafer* (German), *Gramigna montana* (Italian), Groats, *Hafer* (German), *Harfur* (Maltese), *Hartamân* (Arabic), Haver (Dutch, English), *Havre* (Danish, Swedish), Haws, *Jai* (Hindi), *Jayee* (Hindi), *Kaura* (Finnish), *Khao ot* (Thai), *Ma karasu mugi* (Japanese), *Mittelmeehafer* (German), *Mundyav* (Sanskrit), Oat grass, Oatmeal, *Ooto* (Japanese), *Ooto mugi* (Japanese), *Oves kul'tivirovannyi* (Russian), *Oves posevnoi* (Russian), *Oves setý* (Czech), *Ovos siaty* (Slovak), *Peltokaura* (Finnish), Red oat, *Rispenhafer* (German), *Saat-Hafer* (German), *Saedhavre* (Danish), *Shaeer Uryan* (Arabic), *Shûfân* (Arabic), Side oat, *Sult* (Arabic), Tree oat, *Vanlig havre* (Swedish), *Vromi i imeros* (Greek), *Vromi i kalliergoumeni* (Greek), Wild oat, *Yan mai* (Chinese), *Zîwân* (Arabic), and *Zummayr* (Arabic); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of 'I love your music', and 'the witching soul of music'.

The husks yield a liquid known as 'furfural'.

Warning – headaches at the back of the head may be caused by excessive doses. The plant can be poisonous for some animals.

Sativa means 'cultivated'.

In Scotland oat is often referred to as Corn (although this name can mean Maize in North America, and Wheat or Sweetcorn in England).

This is one of the grasses that has provided the World with basic food over at least 5,000 years. When wheat (*Triticum*) was first cultivated oats (and rye, *Secale cereale*) grew in amongst it. It was unsuitable for leavened bread and was made into such things as the

traditional Scottish oatcake.

The cereal was known to the Romans although not cultivated by them. It was grown as an ingredient for the gruel eaten by both the Teutons and Gauls. In fact from the Middle Ages until the 1800s it was part of the staple diet of Brittany, parts of Germany, Scandinavia, Scotland and Wales.

An interesting culinary use that surfaced in the large kitchens of the rich in western Europe from about the 13th to 15th Centuries was as a salt absorber. Salt meat and fish had to be rigorously desalted by soaking in repeated doses of fresh water. This task fell to the scullion who found himself making many arduous trips to the well for changes of water. A wheeze that avoided much of this strenuous exercise involved suspending oatmeal in a linen bag in the liquid in the cauldron to absorb the excess salt.

It can be no surprise that much of the English superstition and many of the old sayings surrounding oat are related to its growth. One predicts a good crop if the seed is sown in January

Who in January sows oats,
Gets gold and groats

and another on St. David's Day (1st March), and likewise if on 24th June (Midsummer Day) a drop of dew or rain is suspended from an ear of oat. The symbolism may seem obscure unless one remembers that the shepherd's pipe used to be fashioned out of straw (the dry hollow, grass stem). Yet another saying presages a poor harvest if the seeds have not been sown before the first cuckoo is heard.

Oats also shared many of the customs associated with wheat particularly those involving the corn dollies, and various countryside rituals used stalks of oat to foretell the virginity of a future lover or the number of children that would be born to the person who is pulling the stalk.

Oat has not been overlooked in literature. For an English example one only has to turn to the famous dramatist, William Shakespeare (1564-1616). He mentions it in several plays including in the Spring song at the end of *Love's Labour's Lost*

When shepherds pipe on oaten straws,
And merry larks are ploughman's clocks,

and also in *The Taming of the Shrew*

Ay, sir, they be ready; the oats have eaten the horses.

Most of the northern European countries now have traditional recipes for oats, and in the United States (where once it was a major crop for animal feed, particularly horses) it is the normal 'flour' with which Quakers make their home-made pastry.

Scottish settlers in North America took the grain with them to their new home and authorities note that it was first cultivated there in Massachusetts in 1602. Some North American Indian tribes including the Karok, Pomo, Haisla and Hanaksiala have used the grain for food. For the Navajo tribes however it was valued more as fodder for their horses.

With eleven other members of the grass family it contributes significantly today to the world's staple diet in the shape of broth, and cakes, Oat is nutritious and is one of the basic commercial ingredients in some types of whisky. The food industry uses flour for bread and biscuits, and flakes for porridge, oatmeal and muesli. Additionally it offers processed feed for horses and poultry.

The liquid obtained from the husks, furfural, has some unusual commercial applications. It is used in oil refining and in making rubber, nylon and antiseptics.

Spots and freckles used to be treated with a preparation in which oat was the main ingredient. Today many cosmetics and soaps contain the plant.

Medicinally, herbalists once used oatmeal in the treatment of abscesses and leprosy, and they prescribed gruel which is easily digested for patients suffering from fevers. Today oats

can be used in Western medicine in the treatment of various depressive illnesses and general languor, as well as menopausal symptoms. It can also be an ingredient in bath preparations for dry skin and eczema.