

Brassica nigra

[Synonyms : *Brassica sinapioides*, *Melanosinapis communis*, *Sinapis nigra*]

BLACK MUSTARD is an annual. Native to North Africa, Asia Minor, Asia (particularly China, and western India) and Europe (except the far north) it has small, mildly mustard-tasting, bright yellow flowers.

It is also known as *Avalu* (Telugu), *Banarsi rai* (Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu), Bastard rocket, *Brasiko nigra* (Esperanto), Brown mustard, *Brukev černá* (Czech), Cadlock, *Cedw Du* (Welsh), *Černohořčice* (Czech), *Černohořčice setá* (Czech), Curled mustard, European mustard, *Kadu-gu* (Tamil), *Kali rai* (Hindi), *Kapusta* (Slovak), Kerlock, *Madharika* (Sanskrit), *Mostarda negra* (Portuguese), *Mostarda ordinária* (Portuguese), *Mostaza* (Spanish), *Mostaza negra* (Spanish), *Moutarde* (French), *Moutarde noire* (French), Mustard, *Mustarda sewda* (Maltese), *Mustasinappi* (Finnish), *Rai* (Urdu), *Raisarisher* (Bengali), Red mustard, *Schwarzer Senf* (German), *Senape nera* (Italian), *Svartsenap* (Swedish), True mustard, and Warlock.

Warning – large internal doses can produce gastro-intestinal inflammation, and externally it could blister sensitive skin. Black mustard must not be taken internally if suffering from thyroid problems or if maintaining a bland diet. (Oil of mustard must never touch the skin.)

Oil is extracted from the seeds.

Black mustard has a similar appearance to white mustard (*Sinapis alba*) but the latter is smaller, has hairy fruit and is less pungent.

Nigra means ‘black’.

Black mustard has been known since prehistoric times. The plant, which was cultivated in Palestine thousands of years ago (it is claimed that it is black mustard seed which is mentioned in the New Testament of the Christian *Bible*), was introduced to Egypt. The ancient Egyptians used the crushed seeds as a condiment as people still do in the East today. It was also familiar to both the ancient Greeks and the Romans and although they both used it as a flavouring in the kitchen, the former employed it far more often for medicinal purposes.

Aphrodisiacal powers have also been attributed to this species for which reason it was included in love potions. The ‘tops’ offered a green vegetable and have continued so to do for centuries.

From Rome the black mustard seed progressed to Gaul and by the 4th Century had spread to Burgundy. In the 15th and 16th Centuries France, which by then had rules for the manufacture of mustard, saw the establishment of corporations of vinegar and mustard makers in several of her cities. In the 17th Century the French used to grind the seed with grape must, for which reason it is thought that the common name is derived from the Latin *mustum ardens* (*mustum* meaning the ‘must’ or newly-fermented grape juice and *ardens* meaning ‘burning’).

The different types of mustard seed were not recognized in Britain until the London Pharmacopoeia of 1720. Old-fashioned mustard owed its powerful flavour to the content of black mustard. As however it is not easy to harvest mechanically because it can grow to a height of 6 to 9 ft. and drops its ripe seed easily, it has been superseded by the less

pungent and closely related brown mustard (*Brassica juncea*). (White mustard, *Sinapis alba*, although of the same family as black mustard is not only less pungent but is also less closely related than brown mustard.)

In England at least the seeds used to be mixed into a ball with honey or vinegar and sometimes a little cinnamon (*Cinnamomum verum*). Then when some mustard was required the ball was mixed with a little more vinegar – until the arrival on the scene of Durham Mustard. Towards the end of the 18th Century a Mrs. Clements of Durham (England) found a satisfactory way of making mustard flour. [There are those who claim that Mrs. Clements hailed from Tewkesbury in Gloucestershire.] Since then many different flavourings have been added to the seed. The English diarist and author, John Evelyn (1620-1706) tells how at that time the Italians mixed the black seed with orange (*Citrus*) and lemon peel. Today the mustard seeds are ground into a flour (except certain blends such as the French *Moutarde de Meaux*) and the individual flavours are achieved by adding different spices, savouries or liquids to moisten this flour. It is one of the ingredients in the commercially prepared condiment ‘Flour of Mustard’.

One fascinating use emerges from England for a celebrated essence of mustard. Essence made from turpentine and rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) and mixed with camphor (*Cinnamomum camphora*) and black mustard seed flour was found to be nearly impervious to the effects of changes in barometric pressure, or to frost. This oil was therefore highly prized by clockmakers and precision instrument makers. It has also been used for making soap.

Another more widespread use for mustard seeds, which arose in the 17th Century as lenses and microscopes became more ‘commonplace’, was that of a unit of measurement. The dimensions of the seeds had the advantage of falling between an average-sized pea (*Pisum sativum*) and a pepper seed (*Piper nigrum*), and they also ranged within a narrow size band. Ten mustard seeds were equivalent to the diameter of a pea or the width of a line of 100 pepper seeds.

The famous English dramatist, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) mentions mustard in several plays. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* Bottom, the Weaver, declares upon learning Mustard-seed’s name

Good Master Mustard-seed, I know your patience well: that same cowardly, giant-like oxbeef hath devoured many a gentleman of your house. I promise you, your kindred hath made my eyes water ere now. I desire you more acquaintance, good Master Mustard-seed.

The leaves have been cooked as a vegetable and, on occasion, have provided feed for livestock. Oil from the seeds, applied externally, was said to be able to encourage hair growth. The oil has also been used as an engine lubricant, and has been an ingredient in the manufacture of soap.

It is said to have been introduced to California in the southern United States in the mid-18th Century by Franciscan friars sent out by Spain as missionaries to the then wild frontier. (Settlers eventually claimed that when black mustard escaped from cultivation it spread forming such tall, dense thickets that school-children had to be warned of the dangers of getting lost in it.) The leaves came to provide a green vegetable for the Luiseño, Diegueño, Iroquois, Hoh, Mohican and Quileute North American Indian tribes, and the Quileute and Hoh Indians also added it to meat and fish dishes as a flavouring. Several of the tribes, including the Hoh and Quileute, absorbed it into their medicinal remedies. As they did with rape (*Brassica napus*) the Cherokee took black mustard to promote appetite, as well as to ease fever, fluid retention, croup and asthma. Both the Shinnecock and Mohican tribes used poultices of it for easing headaches and they applied a leaf poultice for curing toothache. The Meskwaki took ground seed snuff for colds

Medicinally, herbalists have recommended mustard poultices for all manner of ills, including respiratory ailments such as bronchitis and pneumonia and other ailments (including neuralgia and other pains). Oil of mustard as a liniment has been employed for treating rheumatism, colic and chilblains, and a stimulating footbath made from the bruised seeds mixed with hot water has also been recommended for treating both colds and headaches. A teaspoonful of mustard in a cup of boiling water was considered a certain remedy for hiccups and in the 17th Century mustard was also used to treat patients who had been bitten by snakes (a remedy still used in some countries eg. India, today) or who had eaten poisonous mushrooms.