

Brassica rapa

[Synonyms : *Brassica campestris*, *Brassica campestris* var. *rapa*, *Raphanus rapa*]

TURNIP is an annual or biennial. Native to Europe it has small sweetly scented, bright yellow flowers.

It is also known as Bird's rape, Birdsrape mustard, *Brukev řepák* (Czech), Common turnip, Field mustard, *Kala-sar-shapa* (Sanskrit), *Kali sarson* (Bengali, Hindi), *Kapusta* (Slovak), *Karupakatuka* (Malayalam), *Karuppukkadugu* (Tamil), *Mairübe* (German), *Meipen* (Welsh), Mustard spinach, *Nallaavalu* (Telugu), *Navet* (French), *Raapzaad* (Dutch), *Rapa* (Italian), Rape mustard, *Rapo* (Esperanto), *Rave* (French), *Remolacha* (Spanish), *Rübenkohle* (German), *Rübsen* (German), *Shalgham* (Arabic), *Stoppelrübe* (German), Swede, *Turnepo* (Portuguese), Turnip rape, *Wasserrübe* (German), *Weisse Rübe* (German), Wild mustard, Wild rutabaga, and Wild turnip; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of charity (blossom).

Warning – turnip can be poisonous for animals, if fed to them in large quantities over long periods.

The non-poisonous roots of turnip can be confused with those of the equally non-poisonous horseradish (*Armoracia rusticana*), American sweet cicely (*Osmorhiza longistylis*), garden radish (*Raphanus sativus*) and parsnip (*Pastinaca sativa*), and also the poisonous roots of monk's-hood (*Aconitum napellus*), of beaver poison (*Cicuta maculata*), of fool's parsley (*Aethusa cynapium*), of hemlock water-dropwort (*Oenanthe crocata*), of hemlock (*Conium maculatum*), of pokeweed (*Phytolacca americana*) and of white bryony (*Bryonia dioica*).

Rapa is Latin (turnip).

In Scotland, Ireland and parts of northern England Turnip is known as 'swede' (and swede, *Brassica napus* var. *napobrassica*, is called 'turnip').

This European native, that seems to have roused contradictory recognition in different cultures, has been cultivated in India for food for centuries. The Aryans, who were establishing themselves in India around 1200 BC, decreed that their own people must not eat turnip – even if the conquered populace ate the lowly vegetable. It was also familiar to the ancient Greeks and some authorities claim that a lead replica of it was made for the temple at Delphi. The Roman view of turnips seems to have been ambivalent. They did eat them although it would appear that many considered them a simple food suitable for poor country-folk. Low regard for them is illustrated not only as at one period it was commonly used as ammunition by crowds pelting unpopular citizens but also when the 1st Century Roman writer, Columella feels it necessary to make excuses for including it as an ingredient in a recipe for pickled vegetables. On the other hand they devised many dishes that contained turnip and the vegetable also featured in the recipes of the celebrated 1st Century, Roman gourmet, Marcus Gavius Apicius.

Some historians suggest that turnip progressed eastwards from Greece and Rome and eventually reached northern China where it is said to have been well established by medieval times. Apparently it was introduced to Japan from China in about 700. Food historians believe that the Chinese have long preferred turnip roots roasted whereas the Japanese are thought to enjoy them most when pickled although they do eat them boiled

as well. The roots are also pickled in Korea - and far to the south west Arabs also eat them pickled, the pickles coloured pink with beetroot (*Beta vulgaris* subsp. *vulgaris*). In the northern and central areas of Europe the turnip has provided a staple food for many centuries. It is France however that seems to be most often credited with attending assiduously to the plant's growth. Turnip's origins are debated with amazing enthusiasm in some botanical circles but a large body of opinion appears to lean towards the view that the Romans probably introduced the root vegetable to Britain. It was extremely popular there, particularly in soups and stews, until more recent times with the introduction of the potato (*Solanum tuberosum*) – at which point turnip started to attract disparaging comments. However today chefs in Britain are beginning to rediscover its advantages in the kitchen but unlike the past more often roasted than boiled.

In Britain the turnip was believed to give protection against witches and evil spirits. Thus on Hallowe'en it was hollowed out and, with a lighted candle inserted, was hung near the house on a tree or gatepost (much as a pumpkin (*Cucurbita moschata*) would be today). One old country belief held that a mass of blossom on turnips that have been allowed to go to seed indicated a good crop for the following season. While in Kentucky in North America a similar crop was obtained by sowing it with the words

As round as my head and as big as my thigh,
And one for the neighbour who lives near by!

Authorities suggest that 'the neighbour' may have been the Devil.

Turnips are mentioned by the playwright and poet, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

..... I had rather be set quick i' the earth,
And bowl'd to death with turnips.

According to records a few North American Indian tribes ate turnips, including the Malecite Indians. Both the Iroquois and some of the Pomo tribe ate the young leaves as a cooked vegetable.

Medicinally, oil extracted from the root has been used in India to treat some fevers, bronchitis and muscular rheumatism, and the seeds have been used as a poultice. The North American Shoshoni Indian tribe applied seed poultices to burns and the Rappahannock used root poultices on chilblains.

The blossom is the birthday flower for 5th October.