

Capparis spinosa

[Synonyms : *Capparis nummularia*, *Capparis ovata*, *Capparis rupestris*, *Capparis spinosa* subsp. *rupestris*]

CAPER is a deciduous or evergreen shrub. Native to the Mediterranean region, Saudi Arabia, and north Africa to the Sahara desert, it has purple-veined, pink or white, sweetly scented flowers with many long, purple-tipped stamens.

It is also known as *Alcaparra* (Spanish), *Alcaparras* (Portuguese, Tagalog), *Alcaparro* (Spanish), *Al kabara* (Arabic), *Assaf* (Arabic), *Cáp* (Vietnamese), *Caper bush*, *Caparra* (Spanish), *Cappero* (Italian), *Cápre* (French), *Câprier* (French), *Câprier épineux* (French), *Ci shan gan* (Chinese), *Common caper*, *Doniger Kaperstrauch* (German), *Echte Kapernstrauche* (German), *Himsra* (Sanskrit), *Kabar* (Arabic, Marathi, Urdu), *Kabarra* (Punjabi), *Kabbar* (Arabic), *Kabra* (Bengali, Hindi), *Kapara* (Czech), *Kapara trnitá* (Czech, Slovak), *Kapar ciemisty* (Polish), *Kapari* (Croatian), *Kapary* (Polish, Slovakian), *Kaper* (German), *Kapern* (German), *Kapernstaude* (German), *Kapernstrauche* (German), *Kapers* (Danish, Norwegian), *Kapersy* (Russian), *Kaporna* (Hungarian), *Kaporo dorna* (Esperanto), *Kappar* (Maltese), *Káppari* (Greek), *Kappertjes* (Dutch), *Kapri* (Hungarian), *Kapribogyó* (Hungarian), *Kapricserje* (Hungarian), *Kapris* (Finnish, Swedish), *Kaprispensas* (Finnish), *Kaprovec* (Slovenian), *Kaur* (Punjabi), *Kebere* (Turkish), *Keepaa* (Japanese), *Keipaa* (Japanese), *Keppaa* (Japanese), *Kiari* (Hindi), *Kibr* (Urdu), *Kobra* (Hindi), *Kokilakshamu* (Telugu), *Lassaf* (Arabic), *Lussef* (Arabic, Egyptian), *Mchezo* (Swahili), *Mediterranean caperbush*, *Melada* (Malay), *Mrucho* (Swahili), *Mullukattari* (Kannada), *Spiny caperbush*, *Tápána* (Spanish), *Thorny caper*, and *Torkav kappar* (Estonian).

The flowers open at dusk, are pollinated by long-tongued, night-flying moths and other insects and wilt by the following afternoon. Birds that feed on the fruit flesh disperse the seeds when they rub them off their beaks in cracks and crevices in rocks or walls.

Warning – capers can encourage fluid retention and raise blood pressure. They should be avoided if suffering from heart disease.

The unopened flower buds are harvested (in Israel this used to be done by Russian nuns) and then allowed to wither. After this they are graded through copper sieves (the best being the smallest) before they are pickled in wine vinegar and salt. The pickling develops the pungent spicy flavour of the buds. (The young shoots and unripe fruit are sometimes pickled as well.)

Unopened buds are sometimes confused with those of the poisonous caper spurge (*Euphorbia lathyris*).

Spinosa is Latin (thorn, spine) meaning ‘spiny’ with reference to the leaves.

It is probable that caper had magical connotations as Dioscorides, the 1st Century Greek physician, tells of several names ascribed to it by the Magi (the eastern magicians or wise men of that period) including one which means ‘heart of a wolf’. (Authorities note that it was the ancient Greeks who introduced caper to the French in 600 BC.)

There are some authorities who suggest that caper is the ‘desire’ referred to in Verse 5, Chapter 12 of the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament of the *Bible*, and others draw

attention to a reference to 'hyssop' in Kings 1, Chapter 4, verse 31 which may also be caper as hyssop (*Hyssopus officinalis*) was unknown then in the area.

Sheep and goats are particularly partial to the leaves and ripe fruit.

The caper has been used predominantly in cookery for over 2000 years and in Roman times it was especially chosen, pickled, as a seasoning for fish sauces. The Roman natural historian, Pliny the Elder (23-79) mentions that capers were harvested for the kitchen.

The young shoots have also been eaten as a cooked vegetable.

Even today caper buds can be adulterated with those of marsh-marigold (*Caltha palustris*).

A root extract is used commercially by the cosmetics industry.

Medicinally, it seems that the plant may have been employed by the ancient Greeks, for various purposes, including the expulsion of worms. In Asia, India particularly, the root bark has been used to treat paralysis, liver and spleen disorders, rheumatism and toothache, and a poultice of the bruised leaves has been applied as a remedy for gout. Capers have also been used in the treatment of scurvy.