

Cassia senna

[Synonyms : *Cassia acutifolia*, *Cassia angustifolia*, *Senna alexandrina*, *Senna angustifolia*]

SENNA (English, Swedish) is a subshrub. Native to north-east Africa and the Middle East (particularly Arabia and Somaliland), it has small, bright yellow flowers with prominent stamens.

It is also known as Alexandrian senna, *Hindisana* (Hindi), Indian senna, *Intiansenna* (Finnish), Khartoum senna, *Mindhiaval* (Gujarati), *Nela-tangedu* (Telugu), *Nila vaka* (Malayalam), *Nila virai* (Tamil), *Sanna-makki* (Bengali), *Sonamukhi* (Marathi), Tinnevely senna, and True senna.

Warning – must not be used for treating colitis or some forms of constipation. It should only be used under the supervision of a qualified practitioner. Large doses can cause pain, nausea and red coloration of the urine. Even standard or small doses can cause gripping pains and nausea (to counter this the plant is usually combined with one of the aromatic digestive plants). It must not be taken during pregnancy.

Senna is derived from the genus name *Senna* meaning ‘like plants in that genus’.

The plant’s use medicinally was first recognized by Arabian physicians as a remedy for constipation, some authorities claim, only in the 8th or 9th Centuries. The drug is said to have been identified by an Arabian doctor, Johannes Mesue (c.777-c.857) who practised in Baghdad at the invitation of the fifth Abbasid caliph, Harun al-Raschid (766-809). [He is the caliph who will forever be associated with the collection of stories familiar in the West as *The Thousand and One Nights*. These tales, first translated in Europe from Arabic in the early 18th Century, were themselves derived from Arabic, Egyptian, Indian and Persian sources and collected in Arabic over a period from about the mid-9th Century.] The best plants were believed to come from Mecca.

The imported drug was well familiar to English audiences for William Shakespeare (1564-1616) the well known dramatist to include reference to it in *Macbeth* when that fated General declares

..... If thou couldst, doctor, cast
The water of my land, find her disease,
And purge it to a sound and pristine health,
I would applaud thee to the very echo,
That should applaud again. - Pull’t off, I say. -
What rhubarb, senna, or what purgative drug,
Would scour these English hence?

Although records indicate that senna was being grown in England by about 1640 the Country’s much cooler climate rarely permits any seeds to mature.

Medicinally, today senna continues to be recognized widely as a treatment for constipation – and is contained in proprietary medicines.