

Cinnamomum verum

[Synonyms : *Camphora mauritiana*, *Cinnamomum zeylanicum*, *Laurus cassia*, *Laurus cinnamomum*]

CINNAMON (English, German) is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to Sri Lanka and south-western India, it has small and unpleasant smelling, yellowish-white flowers.

It is also known as *Aakupatri* (Telugu), *Aitokaneli* (Finnish), *Åkta kanel* (Swedish), *Albero della cannella* (Italian), *Canela* (Portuguese, Spanish), *Caneleiro* (Portuguese), *Canelero de Ceilán* (Spanish), *Canelheira da Índia* (Brazilian, Portuguese), *Cannella* (Italian), *Cannella del Ceylan* (Italian), *Cannelle* (French), *Cannelle de Ceylan* (French), *Cannellier de Ceylan* (French), *Cây quế* (Vietnamese), *Ceylon cinnamon*, *Ceyloni fahéj* (Hungarian), *Ceyloninkaneli* (Finnish), *Ceylonkanel* (Swedish), *Ceylon-kaneltræ* (Danish), *Ceyloniski cimet* (Croatian), *Ceylon tree*, *Ceylon-Zimt* (German), *Ceylonzimtbaum* (German), *Chek tum phka loeng* (Khmer), *Cinnamone* (French), *Cinnamon tree*, *Coca* (Sanskrit), *Cocam* (Sanskrit), *Common cinnamon*, *Curruva pattai* (Sinhalese), *Cynamon cejloński* (Polish), *Cynamonoweic cejloński* (Polish), *Daalachiinii* (Nepalese), *Daalacinii* (Hindi), *Daaracini* (Bengali), *Daarcinii* (Hindi), *Dalachini* (Marathi), *Dalachinni* (Kannada), *Dalachinni chakke* (Kannada), *Dalchini* (Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Marathi, Oriya), *Dal ciinii* (Urdu), *Darcheeni* (Urdu), *Dar chini* (Iranian), *Darushila* (Urdu), *Darusita* (Sanskrit), *Echter Ceylonzimt* (German), *Echter Zimt* (German), *Erikkoloam* (Malayalam), *Fahéj* (Hungarian), *Hman thin* (Burmese), *Ilavangam* (Malayalam, Tamil), *Ilayangam* (Tamil), *Jou-juei* (Chinese), *Kaneel* (Dutch, German), *Kaneelbaum* (German), *Kaneelboom* (Dutch), *Kanel* (Danish, Norwegian, Swedish), *Kanèl* (Creole), *Kanela* (Filipino/Tagalog), *Kanèla* (Greek), *Kaneli* (Finnish), *Kanelipuu* (Finnish), *Kanell* (Icelandic), *Karun* (Malayalam), *Kayu manis* (Malay), *Kinamon* (Hebrew), *Kinnamomum* (Greek), *Korichnik tselonskii* (Russian), *Korihnoe derevo* (Russian), *Koritsa* (Russian), *Koritsa tseilonskaia* (Bulgarian, Russian), *Kukhii taaj* (Nepalese), *Kurundu* (Sinhalese), *Kuruva* (Tamil), *Kye pi* (Korean), *Lauro aromatico* (Italian), *Lavanagamu* (Telugu), *Lavangapatri* (Kannada, Tamil), *Lavangapatta* (Kannada, Telugu), *Lavangapattai* (Malayalam, Tamil), *Lavangapatte* (Kannada), *Lavangpatram* (Malayalam), *Lavangpatti* (Kannada), *Mdallasini* (Swahili), *Nhục quế* (Vietnamese), *Patrakam* (Hindi), *Qirfah* (Arabic), *Quế hôi* (Vietnamese), *Quế rành* (Vietnamese), *Quế Srilanca* (Vietnamese), *Qurfa* (Arabic), *Salikhah* (Arabic), *Scortisoara* (Romanian), *Seiron-Nikkei* (Japanese), *Seylan tarçini* (Turkish), *Shinamon* (Japanese), *Sil lon gye pi* (Korean), *Skořice* (Czech), *Skořice cejlonská* (Czech), *Skořicovník pravý* (Czech), *Sri Lanka cinnamon*, *Sweetwood*, *Taj* (Sanskrit), *Tamalapatra* (Sanskrit), *Tarçin ağaci* (Turkish), *Tejpat* (Urdu), *Thi ho thit kya bo* (Burmese), *Thit-ja boh gauk* (Burmese), *Thit kya bo* (Burmese), *Tseiloni kaneelipuu* (Estonian), *Tseilonska kanela* (Bulgarian), *Tseilonska koritsa* (Bulgarian), *True cinnamon*, *Tuj* (Gujarati), *Tvak* (Sanskrit), *Varaangam* (Hindi), *Vayana* (Malayalam), *Zimet* (French), *Zimmtbaum* (German), *Zimt* (German), and *Zimtbaum* (German).

The branches are cut (during the rainy season when the bark can be stripped easily) and the bark is detached in single strips from the stem and left to dry and ferment for 24 hours.

The outer bark is then scraped off to leave the inner light-coloured layer, and strips are

tightly rolled and left to dry in shade then in sun. These form 'quills' and the bark becomes a light fawn or dark grey (in other species) colour. Twigs and white bark are also dried. Ground cinnamon loses its aroma quickly.

Different essential oils are obtained from the leaves, bark, stem and roots. A camphor can be obtained from the root bark. The leaves yield yet another oil (which has sometimes been confused with clove oil, *Syzygium aromaticum*). The fruit provide a further oil known as Cinnamon suet.

Warning – anyone allergic to cinnamon could suffer from dermatitis after using perfumery or toiletry products containing the plant.

Cinnamon powder (spice) and quills can sometimes be confused with those of cassia (*Cinnamomum aromaticum*). The latter is coarser.

Verum is Latin (true, genuine) meaning 'true or standard' with reference to the species as typical of the genus.

The confused references to cinnamon and cassia (*Cinnamomum aromaticum*) in early records (as mentioned in the preamble and under cassia) make it difficult for botanical historians to work out with certainty how and when cinnamon, in particular, spread to the West. There is much doubt that the cinnamon revered in ancient Egypt and mentioned in the Book of Exodus in the Old Testament of the *Bible* is that which originates from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), as no mention of Ceylon as the source appears in known records until the 13th Century (in about 1275 it was recorded by a Persian writer, Kazwini). However true cinnamon is also native to south-western India and may well have travelled the Persian trade routes that opened up from that area around 300 BC. But a note of caution remains.

The ancient Egyptians are alleged to have been using cinnamon as one of their spices, not least burnt as incense and used in mummification processes. It may have been familiar to the earlier Minoan civilizations and it is believed that the spice was also known to the Phoenicians, the ancient Greeks and the Romans – and the Arabian merchants eventually carried it on their caravans as far afield as China.

Both the Greeks and the Romans used it in offerings to the gods. It was so expensive however that its other uses were curtailed. As a flavouring it was added to wine but rarely chosen as a culinary ingredient.

Cinnamon must have been a significant symbol of prestige for the Romans. It is said that when the Roman Empress Livia (58 BC-29 AD) lost her second husband, the Emperor Augustus (for whom she had been his third wife), she had a temple built on the Palatine hill in his honour that housed a large piece of cinnamon kept in a golden vessel. Later during that Century, when the Roman Emperor Nero (37-68) murdered his wife, Poppaea, in a fit of passion by kicking her when she was pregnant, he is supposed to have given her a luxurious funeral at which all stocks of cinnamon then in Rome were burnt on her pyre.

Then of course cinnamon was one of the at least 36 ingredients used by Mithridates (c.132-63 BC), the 1st Century King of Pontus (northern Turkey), in a poison antidote (known as Antidotum Mithridaticum or Theriac) which he took daily to acquire an overall immunity – an important consideration if it is remembered that he gained his position of power by poisoning his opposition.

The Arabs are believed to have intercepted Spice Caravans when they came north from India carrying cinnamon and other commodities by camel to the Near East and the Mediterranean. In order to protect their sources (which they well knew) – and thereby their asking price, they fabricated elaborate collection methods. One example of this was described by the Greek historian, Herodotus (485-425 BC). He tells how the Arabs contended that very large birds found the cinnamon quills and carried them to mud nests

built precariously on the sides of precipitous mountains. The story continues that the birds were lured into taking large joints of animal meat (especially prepared for the purpose by their hunters) back to these precarious nests and when the weight of the bounty collapsed the nesting structure, the Arabs harvested the quills that fell to the ground far below. Another imaginative story that was said to have circulated in the Middle Eastern souks for gullible European ears claimed that cinnamon was fished up in nets from the sources of the Nile on the edge of the earth opposite Paradise.

During the Middle Ages in Europe, particularly in the more northern countries, spices were not only enjoyed as a flavouring in food (although the potency of the more exotic ones, at least, must have been negligible upon arrival after their long and tortuous journey to northern and western climes) but were also considered to be desirable for keeping healthy. Towards the end of this period spices are understood to have experienced a marked decline in popularity in western Europe that was only regained when the soldiers returned home from the Crusades. No doubt they brought back with them a taste for spicy food and drink. Master chefs such as the Frenchman, Guillaume Tirel (c.1312-1395), normally known today as Taillevent, used cinnamon in many dishes and in Cameline Sauce it is the main ingredient. Cinnamon also took hold across the Channel in England where it became as important a seasoning as it had become to her French neighbour. The scarcity of cinnamon continued into the 15th Century and may well have contributed to an aura of exclusivity as demand for it led to some extravagant bartering with Arab traders. In the latter part of that Century cinnamon (and a few other sought after spices) could still be traded for eunuchs and white European female slaves. Later 17th Century Spanish records note various ways of making the then fashionable chocolate (*Theobroma cacao*) drink and these included the use of cinnamon as one of the flavourings.

The western Europeans grew impatient at the Venetian control (as well as that of the Arabs) of the lucrative spices and other luxuries imported through them from the East, many of which were beginning to be looked upon as necessities. Over several centuries the Venetians had taken as much care as the Arabs in protecting their trade sources, so much so that authorities point out that the famous traveller, Marco Polo (1254-1324) who was born into one of the noble Venetian merchant families, appears to have been unusually circumspect from time to time in his writings, no doubt with that protection in mind. Different countries laid greater or lesser emphasis on different commodities, and although the medieval English were not high consumers of cinnamon at that time the Italians, the Spanish and the French were. Thus the Venetian monopoly of the cinnamon trade was one example of the frustration building among these nations.

In 1511 the Portuguese had captured Malacca, the Malayan port which gave them command of the passage between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. This, combined with the fact that the overland route was becoming unreliable for traders with the rising power of the Turks, enabled the Portuguese to assume domination of the European spice trade, including cinnamon. In order to maintain their prize the Portuguese wreaked havoc in the area, enslaving native peoples, sinking local dhows and indiscriminately hanging local agents of competing traders. Despite Portuguese precautions however the Dutch gradually began to seize the area from 1595 and, with both countries vying, there was little difference in the treatment of their colonies – if anything it was worse. The Dutch finally gained ascendancy in 1656 but continued to maintain opposition to the cultivation of cinnamon – they are said to have believed that cultivation would destroy its properties – so the wild trees continued to be exploited until 1776. The French had sent the scholarly and travelled naturalist, Pierre Poivre (c.1718-1786) out to the East to cultivate spices for them and he had eventually arrived on the scene in 1767. After successfully smuggling some wild plants out of Dutch controlled territories, he was able to cultivate

them (it takes eight years for a cinnamon tree to mature for harvesting) for French exploitation, thus contributing to the ultimate breakdown of the Dutch monopoly. Apart from anything else cinnamon cultivation in general by the competing plantations eventually became so successful that European demand was sated and for years much of the harvest had to be burnt.

Today it is the Spanish and the English who are said to make particular use of cinnamon in the kitchen – and it is one of the ‘Five Spices’ [the others are aniseed (*Pimpinella anisum*), star anise (*Illicium verum*), clove (*Syzygium aromaticum*) and fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare var. dulce*)] familiar in Chinese cooking. It is however still a traditional ingredient in a variety of dishes from several countries ranging from puddings and pastries to soups, curries and other savoury dishes.

The best quality cinnamon is considered to come from Sri Lanka and China.

Coarsely ground seeds are used sparingly in pot pourris. Seed fat has also been used to make expensive fragrant candles.

Cinnamon is used today commercially by the confectionery industry, by the food industry eg. for pickles and preserved fruit, by the tobacco industry in pipe tobacco, by the drinks and cosmetics industries, by the pharmaceutical industry in some proprietary medicines, and by the toiletry industry as a flavouring in mouthwashes, toothpastes and soaps. The fruit are used to make commercial pot pourri mixtures and incense and the perfumery industry uses the essential oil in perfumes.

Medicinally, cinnamon has been recommended by herbalists and physicians for centuries for treating, for example, diarrhoea, nausea, vomiting, nervous disorders, female ailments, rheumatism, coughs and colds.