

Citrus limon

[Synonyms : *Citrus limonelloides*, *Citrus limonia*, *Citrus limonimedica*, *Citrus limonum*, *Citrus medica* var. *limon*]

LEMON is a semi-evergreen shrub or tree. Probably a hybrid from Asia (particularly north-eastern India), it has small, highly fragrant, white inside, deep pink flowers.

It is also known as *Bara nebu* (Bengali), *Bijapuram* (Telugu), *Bijauri* (Punjabi), *Bijora* (Urdu), *Cherunarakam* (Malayalam), *Citroen* (Danish, Dutch), *Citron* (French, Hungarian, Swedish), *Citronelle*, *Citroník* (Czech), *Citronnier* (French), *Cytryna* (Polish), *Elimichcham* (Tamil), *Kaagati* (Nepali), *Kidanar-attankai* (Tamil), *Lemoniá* (Greek), *Limão cravo* (Portuguese), *Limau* (Malay), *Limbu* (Gujarati, Hindi, Marathi), *Limoeiro* (Portuguese), *Limón* (Russian, Spanish), *Limone* (Italian), *Limonero* (Spanish), *Limono* (Esperanto), *Limung* (Chinese), *Lumi* (Maltese), *Maha nimbu* (Sanskrit), *Manao farang* (Thai), *Median apple*, *Murimau* (Kikuyu), *Natran* (Singhalese), *Nimbu* (Hindi), *Nimmapandu* (Telugu), *Ning meng* (Chinese), *Nümi hāmidh* (Arabic), *Remon* (Japanese), *Sedaran* (Singhalese), *Shauktakera* (Burmese), *Sitruuna* (Finnish), *Sitwon* (Creole), *Wild lemon*, *Zitrone* (German), and *Zitronenbaum* (German); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of discretion, love's fidelity (blossoms), pleasant thoughts, and zest.

The highly fragrant essential oil is extracted from the light yellow fruit rind.

Warning – handling or eating foods containing lemon can cause dermatitis or chapped, peeling or bleeding lips for some people.

Limon and the English word *Lemon* are derived from Persian *limun* or Hindi *lemoen*.

Initially in Europe the lemon was known as the Median apple, a name that also seems to have been used originally for the citron (*Citrus medica*).

The likelihood that the lemon initially existed in India. This is supported by archaeologists' discovery of a lemon-shaped earring of about 2500 BC, in the Indus Valley that was then part of India.

The history of the lemon's progress into Europe seems to be slightly confused. Both the Greek and Roman Empires appear to have heard little of it until shortly before their respective falls. Although it does feature in murals at Pompeii which, with the City, were to be smothered in lava and ash in the Summer of 79 AD from Mount Etna's disastrous volcanic eruption. And the trees brought from Media (an ancient area south-west of the Caspian Sea) are also believed first to have been grown in Greece and then, in the 2nd Century, in Italy.

Arabs from the Middle East and the southern Mediterranean introduced the lemon to Spain in the 8th Century, and also to Sicily and parts of the north-eastern Mediterranean. However it would seem that it was only from the 11th Century onwards that the fruit are likely to have penetrated northern Europe – when the Crusaders returned with it and other Middle Eastern delights from Palestine (where lemon groves had been established since at least the 3rd Century). Some authorities point to a seeming surge in interest in the fruit on Mediterranean shores from the 13th Century when the lemon's cultivation was supported by both Arabian plants and knowledge.

For some authorities the fruit only reached China by the 10th Century, while others claim that it had appeared in Canton about 2,000 years earlier and from there proceeded overland westward to Persia and Asia Minor.

It is said by some authorities that North American lemons are the offspring of seed from a box of the fruit imported from Sicily, which was transported to Los Angeles in 1858. Others hold to the view that the lemon arrived in the New World with the famous Genoese explorer, Christopher Columbus ((1451-1506), that the Portuguese had taken it to South America (Brazil) by 1540, that it was likely to have accompanied Spanish settlers to Florida in the mid-1560s or that early Spanish missionaries had introduced the fruit to California in the 1730s – and that the California Gold Rush of 1849 catalysed the cultivation of the fruit on a large scale (as it did oranges) in the American south-west. Lemon trees live for about 80 years and today many varieties are available. Although the European crop is large that of southern California, in the United States, exceeds it. During the last half of the 19th Century the tree and its fruit came to be familiar to several North American Indian tribes. It became a source of food for the Seminole, Haisla and Hanaksiala Indians and authorities note that the fruit came to be especially esteemed by the Thompson tribe. (Among the Seminole Indians, apparently, the wood was also valued for making bows for young boys in the tribe.)

Records also show that some lemon trees were included in the cargo that accompanied the initial Australian colonists and that the first ones to be seen on the Australian Continent were planted there in 1788.

The fruit are used in many different ways. In the Middle East they are dried black (like limes), in India they are pickled, and in the West, the juice (which on its arrival rapidly superseded verjuice ie. sour grape juice, *Vitis*), the zest and peel are used for flavouring (the latter often for colour as well), and the flowers provide decoration eg. floated on soup. The lemon has natural food preserving properties and its juice is valued especially as an antioxidant for its ability to prevent the freshly cut surfaces of other fruit from turning brown.

The lemon is attributed to the Virgin Mary in Christian paintings and is sometimes used to portray the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and Evil.

In the Salon des Glaces at Versailles the French Sun King, Louis XIV who reigned from 1643, had lemon trees growing in solid silver tubs as part of the décor. Come the French Revolution in the early 1790s however these tree tubs were melted down. Also in France until the end of the 18th Century it was the practice for schoolmasters to receive lemons from their pupils at the end of each school year.

Cosmetically, when Louis XIV (1638-1715) was on the throne, ladies in French society used the lemon to redden their lips – to gain this effect they bit directly into the fruit. Today it is sometimes applied to the skin to ease inflammation from sunburn.

Medicinally, lemon was one of the ingredients in an antidote for plague and was used also as a scurvy preventative at sea. (Today historians claim that over 2,000,000 sailors died of scurvy during the era of the sailing ships.) When the Genoese explorer, Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) set sail on his second voyage towards the New World in September 1493, the crew's rations happened to include apparently fresh lemons grown in Spain. But it has been suggested that it was the Dutch who introduced the idea to European seamen that they should include fresh greenstuff and citrus fruits in their diet at sea. Dutch ventures into the oceans of south-eastern Asia in the 1600s brought them into contact with advanced Chinese thinking. From at least the 5th Century AD Chinese craft carried pots of growing ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) as a supplement for the crew's food. The Europeans, still in the days of sail, were unable initially to envisage sufficient room on board either for pots of growing plants or for regular fresh greenstuff or citrus fruits.

However citrus juice was eventually considered practicable – after much debate and trial of unsuccessful alternatives.

[Before going further it should be pointed out that there seem to be different versions of the following sequence of events.] In the 1790s their Lordships at the British Admiralty decreed that their seamen must receive lemon juice daily after the fifth or sixth week at sea. This was usually mixed with the issue of grog. The credit for the provision of lemon juice is often attributed to a Scottish naval surgeon, John Lind (1716-1794), who in 1756, produced a treatise on a comparative experiment on sailors that he performed while serving on board HMS *Salisbury*. This gave some degree of proof that scurvy could be prevented by eating oranges and lemons and confirmation that the illness was caused by a dietary deficiency. For a while in the mid-1800s their Lordships decided to substitute lime juice for the lemon juice (then possibly from Indonesian lime, *Citrus hystrix*). Not only was this less successful as a scurvy preventative but it drew doubtful enthusiasm from the British seamen as they came to be christened ‘limeys’ by their North American peers. [The scientific reason for the dietary deficiency was not fully understood until the 1920s. In 1928 Vitamin C ie. ascorbic acid, was isolated and then in 1933 synthesised for the first time. As a result a specific Vitamin C deficiency was acknowledged and explained why lime juice proved to be less effective.). In more recent years English seamen have been required (by law) to have access to 1 oz. of lemon or lime juice, daily, after 10 days at sea. Today it is no longer provided in the rum ration as the last tot was piped aboard on 31st July 1970.

Today the perfumery and toiletry industries use the essential oil in eau-de-cologne, soaps, shampoo and toothpastes. The drinks industry employs the fresh or dried peel, particularly as an ingredient in soft drinks, and it is also used in confectionery. The fruit are used by the food and pharmaceutical industries for flavouring, and the cleaning products manufacturers also use lemons in household cleaning materials.

Herbalists also recommended lemon (with powder of brimstone) for treating scabs and itches, and for dealing with crab lice. It has been used in the treatment of rheumatism, narcotic poisoning eg. opium, jaundice and malarial fevers. Lemon juice has also been employed to treat sore throats and sunburn. The fruit pulp was once applied cosmetically for treating spots and freckles. Today it is recognized as a valuable source of Vitamin C.

It is the birthday flower for 11th January.

The blossom is the birthday flower for 12th January.