

Coriandrum sativum

[Synonyms : *Selinum coriandrum*]

CORIANDER is an annual or biennial. Native to the Caucasus and the western Mediterranean it has tiny aromatic, pinkish-mauve flowers.

It is also known as Arab parsley, *Brwysgedlys* (Welsh), Chinese parsley, Cilantro (English, Spanish), *Coentro* (Portuguese), Coliander, Common coriander, Coriander seed, *Coriandre* (French), *Coriandro* (Italian), *Coriandolo* (Italian), *Daaniwal* (Kashmiri), *Dhana* (Marathi), *Dhane* (Bengali), *Dhania* (Hindi, Oriya, Punjabi), *Dhani-yalu* (Telugu), *Dhanyaka* (Sanskrit), *Dimbellal* (Ethiopian), Greek parsley, Japanese parsley, *Katumber* (Javanese), *Katunchar* (Sundanese), *Ketumbar* (Malay), *Koendoro* (Japanese), *Koriander* (Dutch, German, Swedish), *Koriandr* (Russian), *Koriandro kultura* (Esperanto), *Koriandr setý* (Czech), *Korianteri* (Finnish), *Kosbor* (Maltese), *Kothamalli* (Tamil), *Kothambri* (Kannada), *Kothmiri* (Gujarati), *Kothumpalari bija* (Malayalam), *Kothamallie* (Sinhalese), *Kulantu* (Zuni North American Indian), *Kuzbarah* (Arabic), *Ndania* (Kikuyu), *Pak chi* (Thai), *Rau mùì* (Vietnamese), and *Yuen sai* (Chinese); and in flower language it is said to be a symbol of concealed merit, and hidden worth.

The flowers attract bees.

Warning – high doses of the plant can be poisonous, and handling it can cause dermatitis.

Sativum means ‘cultivated’.

The plant, valued for its medicinal and culinary uses for at least 3,000 years (some authorities suggest it was being used as early as 5000 BC), is mentioned in many old writings from the ancient Egyptian *Ebers* papyrus (which mentions that coriander was added to wine to increase its potency) and Sanskrit texts to the *Bible*. Coriander was burnt as incense and it was also used in the mummification process. The Hebrews used coriander to flavour cakes and it plays a role in Jewish ritual as one of the ‘bitter herbs’ prescribed at the Feast of the Passover.

Coriander was also familiar to the ancient Greeks and the Romans. The latter not only used it as a seasoning in savoury dishes and a flavouring for bread but also used it in preserving meat, a practice that they spread throughout western and northern Europe wherever they introduced the plant – and this influence was still apparent in Elizabethan England, let alone any other European country in the 16th Century.

In the Middle Ages it was also viewed in Europe as an aphrodisiac and has been referred to as such in traditional literature eg. *The Arabian Nights*. Coriander also featured in love potions and in the 13th Century European perfumers had become skilled in distilling coriander, as well as other plants, for its essence. Coated in sugar, coriander seeds were eaten as a pink and white sweetmeat, known as ‘coriander comfit’ and referred to today as ‘sugarplums’.

Coriander was once believed by the Chinese to be able to bestow immortality.

The Spaniards introduced coriander to South America where it has become a traditional part of the Latin American cuisine. It was not until a little later that it penetrated North America. The Zuni North American Indians learnt of coriander from the Mexicans. They ate the leaves in salad and the ground seeds were mixed with chili (*Capsicum annuum* var. *longum*) to spice meat. It is believed that coriander was familiar in the Massachusetts area

in North America before 1670, primarily as a flavouring for liquor. The plant was also used as a flavouring by both the Hopi and Keresan Indians.

For the Peruvians coriander is a traditional flavouring found in many dishes and, like modern Egyptians, they have included it in soup. It is also familiar in India as it is believed to have been used to flavour food in southern India as early as the first centuries AD. Fresh leaves can sometimes be known as arab parsley, chinese parsley, greek parsley or cilantro and they are a traditional part of many countries' diet eg. south-eastern Asia, China, eastern India, Mexico, North Africa, the Philippines, Europe and South America. In the Caribbean they are used to spice sauces for rice (*Oryza*) and bean dishes. In China they are a common raw ingredient in salads. In Ethiopia the leaves are used to make a tea and they are an ingredient in bread and sauces. In Thailand and Vietnam the leaves are an important part of many dishes, as they are also in the Netherlands in Europe. In Greece and Scandinavian countries the seeds are added to marinades. Coriander was also used once in Europe for preserving food – and this practice continues in Algeria today.

Despite all this enthusiasm for the plant it has had many detractors and their disapproval appears to have centred on coriander's smell – despite the fact that it has been used to mask the taste of unpleasant medicine, cover foul smells and contribute a lily-of-the-valley (*Convallaria majalis*)-like scent to perfumes and soaps. On the one hand the ancient Greeks compared its scent to that of a 'bedbug' (endorsed by various prominent European writers over the centuries) – and at the opposite extreme it was likened to the skin of citrus fruits. (In the 20th Century the well-known English cookery writer, Elizabeth David (1913-1992) compares its smell with that of orange peel, *Citrus sinensis*.)

Cosmetically coriander was one of the ingredients of the French toilet waters popular until about the 17th Century, particularly the famed Carmelite water first made by nuns in 1379 to pamper the complexion.

The seeds have been used in the past in veterinary medicine for treating cattle and horses. Remaining seed cake after oil extraction has been fed to cattle in some Asian countries.

Today on a commercial basis coriander (primarily the essential oil) is used by the toiletry industry in eau de cologne, soap and 'natural' deodorants. The drinks industry can include it in making gin and liqueurs, and the food industry (particularly in Europe) employs it to spice bread, sausages, confectionery and curry powder. It as already indicated is used in cosmetics and in perfumery products, as well as a flavouring by the pharmaceutical industries. It also provides a commercial flavouring in chewing gum and in North American cigarettes. The seeds can be found in pot pourris.

Medicinally, herbalists used the seeds as a remedy for worms, in the treatment of sickness and sluggish digestion, and they were also used to disguise unpleasant tastes. The plant was employed in poultices to treat inflammation and swellings. In Chinese medicine today it is still used in remedies to combat dysentery and measles, and in eastern India coriander seeds are an ingredient in an eyewash that is used to prevent blindness from smallpox.

The seeds can still be chosen in modern times as a medicinal flavouring, and they are also chewed to counter bad breath.

It is the birthday flower for 12th December.