

Cuminum cyminum

[Synonyms : *Cuminum odorum*]

CUMIN (English, French) is an annual. Native to Egypt and the Mediterranean, it has tiny, white or pinkish flowers.

It is also known as Bishopsweed, Bullwort, *Cimino* (Italian), *Cominho* (Portuguese), *Comino* (Italian, Spanish), *Comino ramano* (Italian), *Cumino* (Italian), Cummin, Ethiopian cumin, Herb William, *Jeerakam* (Malayalam), *Jeerige* (Kannada), *Jereige* (Marathi), *Jidakara* (Telugu), *Jintan puteh* (Malay), *Jinten bodas* (Sundanese), *Jinten puteh* (Javanese), *Jira* (Bengali, Hindi, Oriya), *Jiraka* (Sanskrit), *Jirakam* (Marathi), *Jiru* (Gujarati), *Jorekam* (Malayalam), *Kammün* (Arabic), *Kemmun* (Maltese), *Kmin* (Russian), *Komijn* (Dutch), *Kreutz-Kümmel* (German), *Kumino oficina* (Esperanto), *Ma-ch'in* (Chinese), *Mutter-Kümmel* (German), *Römischer Kümmel* (German), *Roomankumina* (Finnish), *Safad jira* (Bengali, Punjabi), *Seerugam* (Tamil), *Spiskummin* (Swedish), *Sudu-duru* (Sinhalese), *Zeera* (Urdu), *Zero* (Sindhi), *Ziragum* (Tamil), and *Zyur* (Kashmiri); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of cupidity.

Essential oil is extracted commercially from the chopped seeds.

It is known that the Greeks in Mycenae were using cumin to flavour food as early as 2000 BC, and the plant was also familiar to the ancient Egyptians – witnessed by the remains of it found in Egyptian tombs.

Cumin is not only mentioned in the *Bible* (twice in the Old Testament and once in the New Testament where in the Book of Matthew refers to cumin being used in payment of tithes), but also by Hippocrates (c.460-377 or 359 BC), the Greek physician who is called the ‘father of medicine’ in the Western world, Dioscorides the 1st Century Greek physician, and Pliny (23-79), the Roman natural historian. It seems that during this period cumin was not only used as a medicinal plant, but also as a condiment. In addition the smoked seeds were notorious for being able to bring a pallor to the face (as if one had been deprived of sunlight).

Throughout this period cumin is understood to have been associated with covetousness. To be accused of eating cumin was tantamount to being called a miser and Marcus Aurelius (121-80 BC), one of Rome’s most respected emperors, was said to have been so charged.

Despite its warm native habitat cumin will ripen as far north as Norway. The Romans applied cumin as pepper (*Piper nigrum*) is used in the West today, and no doubt it was they who introduced it in northern Europe during their occupation. 9th Century records show that this was yet another of the plants that Charlemagne (747-814), who was king of the Franks and Christian emperor of the west, encouraged his subjects to cultivate. In the 11th Century the German abbess, Hildegard (1098-1179), is said to have recommended flavouring cheese with cumin seeds and pepper. These cooler countries consumed it widely during the Middle Ages. One authority mentions that in Britain it became traditional for the county of Cornwall to present a monarch with a pound of the seed at his or her coronation, a practice that is believed to have persisted well into the 20th Century. Since about the 1500s however cumin seems to have lost some favour on the European mainland, its place being taken to a large extent by caraway (*Carum carvi*). Cumin is still popular however as a flavouring for bread (and cakes) in parts of France

and Germany and eastern Europe – and is used in cheesemaking in Switzerland and the Netherlands. In northern Africa the seeds provide a flavouring for both meat and vegetable dishes. It maintains its place in Indian cookery, as well as that of other parts of Asia where it is used to season highly-spiced dishes, and today it also features in Mexican cooking not least in Chili con carne – as well as further north in that of the United States and Canada.

Cumin has played a part in veterinary medicine since the early Centuries AD and to this day it can still be chosen as an ingredient in some remedies.

Today essential oil is used commercially in the perfumery industry and in veterinary medicine.

The spices are used by the food industry eg. in the Netherlands for flavouring cheese such as Leiden, and in Germany for producing the liqueur, Kümmel, as well as in Aquavit.

Medicinally, in India cumin has been used to treat stomach disorders, diarrhoea and snake bites.