Curcuma longa

[Synonyms : *Amomum curcuma*, *Curcuma domestica*, *Curcuma louza*, *Curcuma purpurascens*, *Curcuma rotunda*, *Stissera curcuma*]

TURMERIC is a perennial. Native to south-eastern Asia (probably India) it has dull yellow flowers.

It is also known as *Açafrão da India* (Portuguese), *Ago* (Samoan), *Ango* (Tongan), *'Aqîd hindî* (Arabic), *Arishina* (Kannada), *Arrow root de l'Inde* (French), *Azafrán de la India* (Spanish), *Cago* (Fijian), Common turmeric, *Croco indiano* (Italian), Curcuma (English, French, Italian), *Curcuma di Levante* (Italian), *Curcuma long* (French), *Curcuma lunga* (Italian), *Dilao* (Tagalog), *Dilau* (Filipino/Tagalog), *Dilaw* (Tagalog), French saffron, *Geelwortel* (Dutch), *Gelber Ingwer* (German), *Gelbwurz* (German), *Gelbwurzel* (German), *Gilber Ingwer* (German), *Gilbwurzel* (German), *Gurkemeje* (Danish), *Gurkmeja* (Swedish), *Guskmeja* (Swedish), *Halada* (Gujarati), *Haldi* (Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Urdu), *Halede* (Marathi), *Halud* (Bengali), *Haridra* (Sanskrit), *Hind zafrani* (Turkish), *Hurd* (Arabic), *Indaansche saffraan* (Dutch), Indian saffron, *Indischer Safran* (German), *Jiang huang* (Chinese), *Kaha* (Singhalese), *Kamin* (Thai), *Khi min khun* (Laotian), *Khmin khun* (Laotian), *Khuong hoàng* (Vietnamese), *Klacze kurkumy* (Polish), Kunir (Javanese), *Kunyir* (Sundanese), *Kunyit* (Malay), *Kunyit betel* (Malay), *Kurkim* (Turkish), *Kurkum* (Arabic, Turkish), *Kurkuma* (Dutch, Finnish, German), *Kurkuma dlinnaia* (Russian), *Kurkuma domashniaia* (Russian), *Kurkumal* (Polish), *Kurkumy koren'* (Russian), Long rooted curcuma, Long turmeric, *Manjal* (Malayalam, Tamil), *Maustekurkuma* (Finnish), *Nghệ* (Vietnamese), *Olena* (Hawaiian), *Pasupu* (Telugu), *Rômiet* (Khner), Round turmeric, *Safran* (Creole, French), *Safran cooli* (Antilles, French), *Safran des Indes* (French), *Safran du pays* (Antilles, French), *Safranwurz* (German), *Sa nwin* (Burmese), *Taamerikku* (Japanese), *Timmer* (Arabic, Egyptian), Tumeric, *Turmerik* (Russian), *Uâtkim* (Vietnamese), *Ukon* (Japanese), Yellow ginger, *Yu chiu* (Chinese), *Yu jin* (Chinese), *Zard chobah* (Persian), and *Zerdé djavé* (Turkish).

Warning – turmeric may be unsuitable for anyone suffering from gallbladder or liver disease.

Longa is Latin (long) meaning 'long or tall'.

As with so many other plants turmeric has attracted and continues to attract its share of mystery. For Asians it is understood to be its colour that has cloaked it in magic and given it a protective aura, and today turmeric still plays a role in most agricultural and social ritualistic practices. In some areas for example luck is beckoned if turmeric is grown at the centre of the paddy fields, while in other areas the crop will be protected if turmeric is grown at the corners of the field.

Thai Buddhist monks' yellow robes were often dyed with Bengal turmeric (one of the several varieties available) and for weddings Tamil women of southern India maintain the tradition of decorating their hands and feet with the spice. Hindus include turmeric in religious offerings, and it is used to dye the funeral cloth worn at their death by married Hindu women when they are carried to the funeral pyre.

In Fiji and the Philippines the dye has been applied as a yellow body paint, and the latter have also used it to dye matting. In China the roots have been used for dyeing cotton. Today in

Papua New Guinea and other parts of Asia bark cloth is still steeped in root scrapings mixed with water in order to dye the material yellow.

Turmeric actually produces two different yellow dyes – one that is water-soluble and the other that is alcohol-soluble. Apparently it is the latter that is sensitive to both acids and alkalis and analytical chemists have used it as an indicator. The colour change ranges through yellow for acidic solutions to reddish-brown for alkaline ones.

It used to be cultivated in Hawaii where it is believed to have been introduced when first colonized by Tahitian explorers. For the Hawaiians turmeric gave them a dye, a medicine that was still being used in childbirth at the beginning of the 20th Century, and an important addition to purification rites once performed before certain religious rituals, especially when harvesting kava kava (*Piper methysticum*) roots. (They also used it as an ingredient in remedies for various nasal disorders and for blood purifiers.) Since the mid-20th Century however as turmeric fell into disuse its cultivation dwindled so that the plant is almost a rarity on the Islands now.

Turmeric, the spice, features in most south-eastern Asian dishes. It is used particularly to colour rice, as a flavouring (as in China) and also as an ingredient in the majority of Asian fish dishes. In some parts of Asia the leaves have also been used as a flavouring, and on the island of Java (now part of Indonesia) the tuberous underground stems have yielded a flour that was used to make cakes.

Nowadays India cultivates the plant on a wide scale, producing an annual 12,000 tons of which 83% is exported.

Once held in the same esteem as ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) in the Middle East, particularly by the Persians and Arabs, turmeric then fell into disuse there. It did become familiar to the Greeks and as well as describing the spice the 1st Century Greek physician, Dioscorides, tells how it was not only used as a culinary and medicinal ingredient – but also as a hair remover. It is possible that the Arabs introduced turmeric to the Spanishand of all the western European countries she was the only one who welcomed the new spice during the Middle Ages. Nowadays it is understood that it is the British who are the primary western European importers of it.

Turmeric crossed the Atlantic and it has now become naturalized in the West Indies where it has been absorbed into Creole dishes.

Today the root is used commercially for dyeing leather and other materials such as cotton, silk and woollen cloth (and that includes carpets too). It is a standard ingredient in Indian curry as well as in Worcestershire sauce. Turmeric is also used as a colouring by the food industry (in butter, margarine, cheese and mustards) and by the drinks industry (in fruit drinks and liqueurs).

Its main use in the West today is culinary but the East still employs turmeric medicinally, particularly for the juice applied externally on bruises, skin diseases, wounds and leech bites. Asians also apply it in the form of a paste to encourage the formation of scabs during smallpox or chickenpox, and as an internal remedy for colds, blood disorders, worms and catarrh. It has also been used in the treatment of leprosy and diabetes. Curiously, in common with the West, its yellow appearance (for which the chemical curcumin is responsible) led to turmeric's employment as a cure for jaundice and fevers and, as has been seen on other odd occasions when the so-called western Doctrine of Signatures has been invoked in the past, the chance remedy has been confirmed as effective by some modern practitioners. In addition in the early 21st Century reserchers in Bangalore at the Institute of Science were investigating the possibility that curcumin might be able to help in the treatment of malaria. In the West as already indicated the powdered, dried root is now used by the pharmaceutical industry only to colour medicine and ointments.