

Cydonia oblonga

[Synonyms : *Cydonia cydonia*, *Cydonia europaea*, *Cydonia japonica*, *Cydonia seibosa*, *Cydonia vulgaris*, *Pyrus cydonia*, *Sorbus cydonia*]

QUINCE is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to western Asia (probably Turkey), it has small fragrant, pink flowers with many stamens.

It is also known as *Aiva* (Russian), *Aiva obyknovennaia* (Russian), *Almindelig kvæde* (Danish), *Amritphala* (Sanskrit), *Ayva* (Turkish), *Ayva agh* (Turkish), *Bamsutu* (Kashmiri), *Behidana* (Hindi), *Bihi* (Hindi), *Cidónia* (Portuguese), *Cognassier* (French), *Cognassier à fruit comestible* (French), *Coing* (French), Common quince, *Cotogno* (Italian), *Dula podlhovastá* (Slovak), *Dunja* (Serbian), *Echte Quitte* (German), *Graines de coing* (French), *Habbus safarjal* (Arabic), *Habush* (Hebrew), *Japanse kwee* (Dutch), *Kdouloň obecná* (Czech), *Kdouloň podlouhlá* (Czech), *Kvæde* (Danish), *Kvædetræ* (Danish), *Kvede* (Norwegian), *Kvitten* (Swedish), *Kvitten-arter* (Swedish), *Kvitteni* (Finnish), *Kwee* (Dutch), *Kweeboom* (Dutch), *Kweeper* (Dutch), *Kydoni* (Greek), *Marmeleiro* (Portuguese), *Marmelo* (Portuguese), *Marumero* (Japanese), *Mela* (Italian), *Melocotogno* (Italian), *Membrillero* (Spanish), *Membrillo* (Spanish), *Pærekvæde* (Danish), *Pigwa* (Polish), *Pigwapospolita* (Polish), *Pomo cotogno* (Italian), Portugal quince, Portuguese quince, Quince seed, Quince tree, *Quitte* (German), *Quittenbaum* (German), *Safarjal* (Arabic, Persian), *Sfargel* (Maltese), *Shimai-mathala* (Tamil), *Simadanimma* (Telugu), Smyrna quince, *Tukhme safarjal* (Persian), *Wen po* (Chinese),; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of bitterness, disappointment, fruitfulness, love, scornful beauty, and temptation (blossom).

Warning – the seeds are poisonous and must not be taken internally.

Oblonga is Latin (oblong) meaning ‘oblong (almost parallel sided)’ with reference to the leaves.

The downy yellow quince could in actual fact be considered to be the starting point for marmalade, a traditional English preserve. The ancient Greeks and the Romans ate a form of ‘marmalade’ but this was not viewed as a conserve nor was it made as today traditionally from oranges. The ‘marmalade’ was medicinal (a treatment for kidney, liver and stomach disorders) and it was made from quinces (peeled, pips removed, then tightly squeezed into a jar of honey that was stored for one year until it had become a thick syrup, occasionally with apple (*Malus*) flesh added). The nymphs, according to Greek legend, offered this conserve to Zeus (when a child). It was dedicated to Aphrodite, and quinces came to be a symbol of love, happiness and fertility for the Greeks.

It is most likely that it was the Moors who brought the ‘marmalade’ to Portugal, and Portuguese traders in turn exported it to England (and no doubt other parts of Europe) during the first half of the 15th Century. The Greek and Latin names for it were *melimelon* and *melimelum* respectively, and the Portuguese word for the quince conserve was *marmelada*. By then honey had been superseded by sugar (*Saccharum officinarum*) as a sweetening agent. [It is understood to be generally accepted that the Persians (now Iranians), not the Arabs, were the first to use sugar on a wide scale for preserving fruit.] It is believed that quinces were replaced by oranges (*Citrus aurantium*) in 1790 in Dundee

in Scotland where this now popular and traditional preserve is said first to have been manufactured.

However the history of marmalade is only half told. This Portuguese conserve gained quite a reputation in England with the addition of aphrodisiacs, one of which was the root of sea-holly (*Eryngium maritimum*). *A Closet for Ladies and Gentlemen*, published in 1608, contained several marmalade recipes. Two included sea-holly as an ingredient and these were still being prepared in the mid-19th Century in Suffolk in England, and another included supplements for the sea-holly in case the latter's aphrodisiacal qualities were considered to have been insufficient to have the required effect. The conserve's fame was such that by 1727 ladies of uncertain virtue would be referred to as 'marmelet madams'. It is wryly amusing to contemplate the faces of upright Victorian matrons in the following Century if they had realized the history of the traditional conserve gracing their breakfast tables.

Growing in warm climates, the fruit is comparatively soft and juicy and in ancient times was widely cultivated. Many authorities believe that references made to the apple, in translations of some Jewish and Christian writings, should have been made to the quince. The fruit is depicted on many Greek statues and, because of its symbolism, was often given as a token of love. Plutarch (c.46-c.120), the Greek historian, biographer and philosopher, refers to the bridal custom of newly-weds sharing a quince. Not only was it popular with the Greeks who, in addition to preparing a conserve, also ate the fruit cooked in a pastry case (for which the quince was hollowed out and filled with honey), but it was also a favourite with the Romans.

They, the Romans, used its essential oil (extracted from the fruit) for perfumery, and, like the Greeks, also held the fruit sacred to Venus (known to the Greeks as Aphrodite). Venus can be seen holding a quince in her right hand on some of the Roman statues. The fruit were also depicted in murals and mosaics. The latter in Pompeii nearly always show quinces in the paws of a bear. The celebrated Roman poet, Virgil (70-19 BC), writes of 'golden apples' and authorities believe that these were quinces as at that time they were the only fruit known to the Romans that could meet the description. Pliny the Elder (23-79), the Roman natural historian, indicates the respect paid to the quince for its medicinal qualities by the length of the references he makes to them and in these he mentions that the fruit were believed to be able to give protection from the evil eye.

The ancient Greek marriage custom of including a quince in the ritual spread to other parts of Europe and continued into the Middle Ages, especially in France where it became customary then for cities to present visiting royalty with a marmalade-like quince preserve or paste. The French have used quince in cookery, perfumery and medicine for centuries. Both they and the Spanish prepared different recipes in the 14th Century for the popular quince paste (another version of the forerunner of marmalade). It is perpetuated today in a pink sweetmeat still available in France. This traditional quince paste (sweetened with sugar) is sold in little round boxes made of thin wood and according to 19th Century tradition *cognac* from Orléans, eaten while pregnant, will enhance the mind of an unborn child.

As already indicated the fruit appeared in England in the 15th Century. A menu for a banquet there in 1446 includes baked quinces that must have been a new dish and the height of luxury. Today the fruit are a novelty there – although quince sauce is still made as a traditional accompaniment for partridge.

The quince crossed the Atlantic in the 17th Century and must have had some popularity on the North American eastern seaboard as seeds for them were one of the items sought in The Massachusetts Bay Colony's Memorandum for 16th March 1629. Although authorities suspect that quinces were grown in orchards of the South through the 17th and

18th Centuries the fruit's popularity gradually subsided as today there is little demand for them on that Continent even in the areas where they were once cultivated.

The quince symbolized different things in various customs, some of which are more easily appreciated by the northern European if it is remembered that the fruit, grown in warmer climates, does not have to be cooked as it can be a pleasure to eat raw. To dream of a quince was an omen of success in love, and newly married couples would share the fruit as a symbol of love. If quinces were eaten with other people, given to them as gifts, or thrown at them, they were accepted as gestures of love. The famous English playwright and poet, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) weaves this into his play, *Romeo and Juliet*. For the banquet on the eve of Juliet's arranged marriage to Count Paris (when she drugs herself), her Nurse tells Lady Capulet that

They call for dates and quinces in the pastry.

In contrast the blossom was considered to be a funeral flower.

Some people believe in Christian lore that the quince is the Forbidden Fruit.

Quince has been used cosmetically in skin lotions and creams, and has provided yet another remedy for baldness.

Today the fruit is used on a commercial scale by the drinks industry eg. the manufacture of ratafia, and the mucilage from the seeds is employed by the cosmetics and toiletry industries.

Medicinally, herbalists recommended it for treating dysentery, diarrhoea, fevers, gonorrhoea and loss of appetite. It was also used as an antidote for poisoning, especially that caused by the Christmas rose (*Helleborus niger*). More recently its use has been primarily as an ingredient in eye lotions to soothe eyes, and as a remedy for diarrhoea.

It is the birthday flower for 6th May.