

Elettaria cardamomum

[Synonyms : *Alpinia cardamomum*, *Amomum cardamomum*, *Amomum repens*, *Elettaria repens*]

CARDAMOM is a shrub. Native to southern India (particularly the southern part of Malabar), and to Sri Lanka and Myanmar (Burma), it has small yellow-tipped, blue-streaked flowers.

It is also known as *Aa'l budu aaa'l* (Kashmiri), *Aila cheddi* (Tamil), *Alaichi* (Oriya), *Alaka* (Tamil), *Amome* (French), *Amomo* (Italian), *Bai dou kou* (Chinese), *Bala* (Burmese), *Bastard cardamom*, *Buah pelaga* (Malay), *Cardamome* (French, German, Italian), *Cardamome blanche* (French), *Cardamome de Ceylan* (French), *Cardamome du Malabar* (French), *Cardamomen* (German), *Cardamome verte* (French), *Cardamomier* (French), *Cardamomo* (Italian, Portuguese, Spanish), *Cardamomo medio* (Italian), *Cardamomo minore* (Italian), *Cardamompflanze* (German), *Cardamom seeds*, *Cardamon* (English, Finnish, German), *Cardamone* (Italian), *Cardamungu* (Tamil), *Ceylon cardamom*, *Chhota elaichi* (Bengali, Hindi), *Chhoti elachi* (Bengali), *Chhoti elaichi* (Hindi), *Cluster cardamom*, *Echte kardamom* (Dutch), *Ela* (Sanskrit), *Elachi* (Bengali), *Elakkai* (Tamil), *Elakkayi* (Telugu), *Elathari* (Malayalam), *Elaychi* (Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi), *Elettariia kardamon* (Russian), *Elichii* (Urdu), *Ellka* (Sanskrit), *Ensal* (Singhalese), *Enasal* (Singhalese), *Gardamungu* (Indonesian), *Grbat* (Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian), *Green cardamom*, *Grüner Kardamom* (German), *Hail* (Arabic), *Hal* (Arabic), *Hel* (Hebrew, Persian), *Hel bava* (Arabic), *Hemame* (Turkish), *Hhabbahân* (Arabic), *Hhabb el hâl* (Arabic), *Hhamâmâ* (Arabic), *Hirvi velchi* (Marathi), *Hiyl* (Turkish), *Hvid kardemomme* (Danish), *Ilaayacii* (Hindi), *Ilaychi* (Urdu), *Kakilahe-khurd* (Persian), *Kakule* (Serbian, Turkish), *Kapulaga* (Indonesian, Malay), *Kapulaga sabrang* (Indonesian, Malay), *Karadamomo* (Japanese), *Kardamo* (Greek), *Kardamom* (German, Hungarian), *Kardamomi* (Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian), *Kardamomo* (Esperanto), *Kardamon* (Russian), *Kardamona* (Serbian), *Kardamon malabarski* (Polish), *Kardemom* (Dutch), *Kardemomme* (Danish, Norwegian), *Kardemumma* (Finnish, Swedish), *Karudamon* (Japanese), *Kis kardamom* (Hungarian), *Kleine Kardamomen* (German), *Krâkô* (Khmer), *Krawan thet* (Thai), *Küçük kakule* (Turkish), *Lesser cardamom*, *Lila alchi* (Gujarati), *Luk krawan* (Thai), *Malabar cardamom*, *Malabári kardamom* (Hungarian), *Malabarkardamom* (German), *Malabarkardemomme* (Danish), *Mirisavci* (Serbian), *Pai-tou-k'ou* (Chinese), *Pala* (Burmese), *Panlat* (Burmese), *Petite cardamome* (French), *Queen of the spices*, *Round cardamom*, *Shooshmir* (Armenian), *Shouzuku* (Japanese), *Shushmir* (Armenian), *Srdiš* (Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian), *Srdiš* (Serbian), *Suksmaila* (Sanskrit), *Tiểu đậu khấu* (Vietnamese), *True cardamom*, *Velchi* (Marathi), *Velchil* (Marathi), *Veldoda* (Marathi), *Veldola* (Marathi), *Vrtni prpr* (Croatian), *Xiao dou kou* (Chinese), *Yealak-kayulu* (Telugu), *Yelakkai* (Malayalam, Tamil), *Yelakki* (Kannada), *Yelakulu* (Telugu), and *Yelam* (Malayalam).

From mid-Autumn for 3 months the semi-ripe pods are cut individually from the plant and the seeds are dried in darkness in their casing in order to retain their flavour. The oil can then be extracted from the seeds. Cardamom is probably the next most expensive spice after saffron (*Crocus sativus*) and vanilla (*Vanilla planifolia*). It is not easy to cultivate or

harvest. The best quality is considered to come from rainforests off the Malabar Coast (where it is called *elettari*) followed by good quality cardamom from Mysore, Sri Lanka, Aleppi and Madras. Seed pods from other members of the ginger family, particularly round cardamon (*Amomum compactum*), can be offered as cardamom but they are considered to be inferior. Black seed pods (which have a strong flavour) will have been sun dried, while green seed pods (which have a milder flavour) will have been dried in large kilns.

Warning – prolonged handling of the seeds can cause dermatitis and can make skin more sensitive to sunlight.

Cardamomum is said to be a Greek name for an Indian spice, *kardamon*.

In ancient Greek and Roman times the meaning of the word ‘cardamom’ seems never to have been consistent as merchants (and thus everyone else at that time) used it for one spice or another or a group of spices which could vary in content from one market to another.

Over time in Europe the word has settled on *Elettaria cardamomum*. But sympathy must be extended to modern historians who have to unravel its early historical details from highly confusing records. Facts such as its progress into the Mediterranean and Europe are uncertain and the following information is offered on that understanding.

Before the early Centuries AD cardamom was a common spice throughout India used particularly in hotly-spiced sauces – and was no longer limited to its native habitat in the south of the Country and neighbouring areas further south still. It had penetrated beyond India’s northern borders as in ancient Egyptian times the seeds were chewed there to whiten teeth. Cardamom was being imported by the ancient Greeks by the 4th Century BC and is referred to by Pedanius Dioscorides, the 1st Century Greek physician, in his *De materia medica*. It was also being imported by the Romans by the 1st Century AD. Both the Greeks and the Romans filled shells with a mixture of cardamom and wax as a perfume worn in their hair or on their clothing. This was a fashion that persisted for several centuries not least among some of the Christian clergy who were being berated for it in the 4th Century by the Italian scholar and Latin Church father, St. Jerome (c.342-420). In addition the use of cardamom for dental hygiene had not been confined to the Egyptians as the Europeans also found the taste of garlic (*Allium sativum*) was neutralized if the cardamom seeds were chewed after a meal.

By the Middle Ages cardamom, then often called Amomum, had penetrated more northern areas of Europe. It was to be found in some of the kitchens of the rich where the cooks used it for flavouring and, with other foreign spices, was a sign of prestige. Apparently it was far more popular in England than France and records show that while Jean le Bon (1319-1364) of France, who had been taken prisoner at Poitiers in 1356 by Edward the Black Prince (1330-1376), was held at his cousin’s home in England awaiting payment of the requisite ransom cardamom was one of the spices included in his household expenses. At the turn of the 20th and 21st Centuries it is the Swedes who consume the most cardamom in Europe. They are said to account for one quarter of India’s output.

More recently in the Middle East it has been used as a flavouring in coffee (in Iran particularly) and in mulled wine. In Arabian countries, especially where cardamon coffee is offered as a symbol of hospitality, cardamom is believed to be able to enhance digestion and for good measure act as an aphrodisiac. In India cardamom has long held its reputation for being an aphrodisiac, and the sugar-coated seeds feature in Hindu festivals and ceremonies.

Ground cardamom is primarily used as a spice. It is a significant ingredient in Eastern as well as Scandinavian cookery. (In Malaysia it is chewed with betel nut, *Areca catechu*.) These Middle Eastern and Eastern flavouring practices are beginning to gain popularity on other Continents, including North America and Europe. Here not least in parts of South

America cardamom can now be found added to coffee, tea (or chocolate too) on occasion. Pol Pot (1926-1998), the military leader of the devastatingly cruel Khmer Rouge movement in South-Eastern Asia who was held personally responsible for more than 2 million deaths in Cambodia in the 1970s, came from a Khmer race. Known as the Pohns, the Khmers live in the Cardamon Mountains of Cambodia and are descendants of freed royal slaves. Their lives have been spent harvesting cardamom from the forest or from small cultivated areas. It is such a significant part of their life that the rhythm of their religious festivals has been determined by the growth cycle of the shrub. Sadly their poverty has long been emphasized by the contrast in price the dealers have paid them for the seeds compared with that ultimately demanded in the market place.

Cardamom can be used as a flavouring to disguise the taste of medicine. (In classical times it was one of the at least 36 ingredients used by Mithridates (c.132-63 BC), the 1st Century King of Pontus (northern Turkey), in a poison antidote (known as Antidotum Mithridaticum or Theriac) which he took daily to acquire an overall immunity – an important consideration if it is remembered that he gained his position of power by poisoning his opposition.)

Today the essential oil is a commercial ingredient used by the perfumery industry particularly in some eau de colognes. It is also used by the food industry as flavouring in cakes, gingerbread, sausages, pickles and curry powders. The drinks industry uses the oil as flavouring in cordials, bitters and liqueurs, and it also provides a commercial flavouring for the pharmaceutical industry in proprietary medicines.

Medicinally, it has been used locally in India and some other Asian countries to treat depression, some heart disorders, dysentery and diarrhoea. It has also been used to counter vomiting and nausea. Where cardamom is easily accessible it is believed by some that its over-use could cause impotency. On the other hand a daily dose is said to maintain general health and improve eyesight.