

*Eragrostis tef*

[Synonyms : *Cynodon abyssinica*, *Cynodon abyssinicus*, *Eragrostis abessinica*, *Eragrostis abyssinica*, *Eragrostis abyssinica* var. *alba*, *Eragrostis abyssinica* var. *viridis*, *Eragrostis pilosa*, *Eragrostis pilosa* subsp. *abyssinica*, *Eragrostis pilosa* var. *tef*, *Eragrostis tef* subsp. *spiciformis*, *Poa abyssinica*, *Poa cerealis*, *Poa radicans*, *Poa tef*]

**TEF** (Afrikaans, English, Ethiopian, Swedish) is an annual grass. Native to north eastern Africa (particularly Ethiopia), it has green, white or violet flower spikelets.

It is also known as *Abessijns liefdegras* (Dutch), *Abessinsk rapgraes* (Danish), Abyssinian lovegrass, Annual bunch grass, *Äthiopisches Liebesgras* (German), *Chimanganga* (Malawian), *Gewone bruin tef* (Afrikaans), Lovegrass, *Mil éthiopien* (French), *Taf* (Tigrinya), *T'af* (Arabic), *Tafi* (Afar, Oromo), *Tahf* (Arabic), *T'ef* (Arabic, Ethiopian), *Teff* (English, Swedish), *Teff grass*, *Tefheinä* (Finnish), *Tefu* (Japanese), *Thaf* (Arabic), *Thaff* (Arabic, English), *Theff* (Arabic), *Tteff* (Arabic), *Tyaff* (Amharic), Warm season annual bunch grass, and Williams lovegrass.

1,000 of these tiny brown or white seeds weigh between 0.3 and 0.4g.

*Tef* is a local Ethiopian name for this grass.

This grass has long been cultivated in Ethiopia for its grain which, according to some historians, has provided a staple food there from some time between 4000 BC and 1000 BC. A further indication of the length of time that tef has been employed by man is suggested in records which note that this was one of the plants that offered straw for making the mud bricks used in the pyramids built around 3359 BC – and it is still being used to make bricks to this day.

Two of its invaluable features are its tenacity under drought conditions and the high protein content of the grain.

The grain is ground and fermented to produce a brownish flour that is used for making ‘ingera pancakes’ or bread which is eaten in the fingers with other foods. (Apparently no added yeast is required for the fermentation and it is thought that this may be the only grain that bears yeast in a symbiotic relationship.) At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century the Dutch Medical Centre at Leiden University confirmed that their recent research had shown that tef is gluten-free. For coeliac sufferers in the West, for whom wheat *Triticum*, barley *Hordeum* and rye *Secale* are poisonous because they contain gluten, this was good news as the Ethiopian cereal could offer an alternative ingredient for breadmaking.

Authorities believe that it was ‘The Abyssinian’, in other words James Bruce (1730-1794) who first introduced tef outside its native habitat. The noted Scottish explorer described much of his progress through Abyssinia (now known as Ethiopia) in 1768 in his *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* (published in 1790) – descriptions that were considered extravagant until later confirmed by his peers. He is said to have taken some grain to the Botanic Garden in Florence and this led to the publication in 1775 of the first botanical description of the plant. But it would seem that it was not until the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century that the grain was introduced constructively to other parts of Africa, and to Asia and Australia. Even today in North America, apart from its cultivation for a growing Ethiopian population there, tef would seem to be viewed primarily as a fashionable crop for gourmets and health food fanatics.

The grass now offers green forage for livestock in eastern and southern Africa – and the straw is also fed to mules. Apparently though in Kenya, South Africa and Australia it has been cultivated primarily for its hay.