

Fagopyrum esculentum

[Synonyms : *Fagopyrum cereale*, *Fagopyrum fagopyrum*, *Fagopyrum sagittatum*, *Fagopyrum sarracenicum*, *Fagopyrum vulgare*, *Polygonum cereale*, *Polygonum emarginatum*, *Polygonum fagopyrum*, *Polygonum tataricum*]

BUCKWHEAT is an annual. Native to central and northern Asia it has tiny scented, greenish-white flowers.

It is also known as *Ajda* (Slovenian), *Alforfón* (Spanish), *Almindelig boghvete* (Danish), *Bagonal* (Hindi), *Beaucuit* (French), *Beechwheat*, *Blé de Barbarie* (French), *Blé de sarrasin* (French), *Blé noir* (French), *Boekweit* (Dutch), *Boghvete* (Danish), *Bokhvete* (Norwegian), *Bokkveite* (Norwegian), *Bokvete* (Swedish), *Bokwiet* (Afrikaans), *Bouquette* (French), *Bovete* (Swedish), *Brank*, *Bro* (Indian), *Bucail* (French), *Buchweizen* (German), *Bullimong*, *Common buckwheat*, *Corn heath*, *Crap*, *Duck wheat*, *Echter Buchweizen* (German), *Faggina* (Italian), *Fago ordinara* (Esperanto), *Fagopiro* (Italian), *Fagopyron tarbuti* (Hebrew), *Fagopyrum*, *Fat hen*, *French wheat*, *Goose buckwheat*, *Grano saraceno* (Italian), *Grano sarraceno* (Spanish), *Grano turco* (Spanish), *Grechikha posevnaia* (Russian), *Gryka siewna* (Polish), *Gryka zwyczajna* (Polish), *Gwenith yr Hydd* (Welsh), *Hajdina* (Hungarian), *Heidenkorn* (German), *Henta soda* (Arabic, Egyptian), *Indian wheat*, *Japanese buckwheat*, *Kosemet* (Hebrew), *Kotul* (Hindi), *Kutu* (Hindi), *Kyoubaku* (Japanese), *May mil* (Korean), *Mil des Maures* (French), *Mithe phaphar* (Nepalese), *Navadna ajda* (Croatian, Slovenian), *Ogal* (Punjabi), *Phaapar* (Nepalese), *Phaphar* (Hindi), *Poganka* (Polish), *Pohánka* (Hungarian), *Pohánka jedlá* (Slovak), *Pohanka obecná* (Czech), *Pohanka setá* (Czech), *Pohánka prihlášené* (Slovakian), *Pohánka vagy hajdina* (Hungarian), *Pohanky seté* (Czech), *Pryka zwyczajna* (Polish), *Qiao mai* (Chinese), *Renouée sarrasin* (French), *Rubión* (Spanish), *Saracen corn*, *Saracen wheat*, *Sarasin* (Italian), *Sarrasin* (French), *Sarrasin corn*, *Sarrâzin* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Shari-mam* (Burmese), *Silverhull buckwheat*, *Soba* (Japanese), *Tatarka gryka* (Polish), *Tattari* (Finnish), *Tian qiao mai* (Chinese), *Tilii phaphar* (Nepalese), *Tonda* (Nepalese), *Trigo negro* (Spanish), *Trigo-sarraceno* (Portuguese, Spanish), *Vanlig bovete* (Swedish), *Viljatatar* (Finnish), and *Willow-wind*.

Warning – buckwheat can cause allergies in humans. The fresh or dried plant, other than the grain, can cause photosensitivity in animals (fagopyrism). (Photosensitization is unlikely to occur in humans when de-husked grain is used.)

Esculentum is Latin (eatable).

Its name comes from the Middle Dutch words *boecweit* ie. *boeke* meaning ‘beech’ and *weite* for ‘wheat’ or according to other authorities as a corruption of a German word for ‘beech wheat’ *Buchweizen*.

Apparently it is believed that the grain was harvested from the wild in its native Chinese habitat (possibly Yunnan province in south-western China) until the early centuries AD. Initial cultivation began and first known written mention of buckwheat appears in 5th or 6th Century Chinese documents. Like others it is believed that buckwheat was introduced to Japan from China via Korea and there it is recorded in an official document known as *Shoku-Nihongi* which was only finished in 722. Authorities note in more recent times that

buckwheat used to provide a staple food for the Japanese who lived in their Islands' inconducive mountainous areas.

The cereal has been cultivated in Europe since the 15th Century and until the end of the 19th Century was one of the staple foods of north-eastern Europe. Authorities provide different theories on how it reached western Europe from its native lands to the East. For instance some plant historians suggest that buckwheat was brought home to northern Europe by Crusaders in the 12th and 13th Centuries when they returned from their battles in the Middle East: On the other hand the French novelist and playwright, Alexandre Dumas (1824-1895) claimed that the plant was introduced to Spain by the Saracens – and from there the rest of western Europe – and yet others suggest that it entered eastern Europe from Russia. It is known however that it had arrived in Germany by 1436, had entered France by 1460, but only penetrated the Italian region by the middle of the 16th Century.

It came to be known to North American Indian tribes after its introduction by early European settlers who cultivated it for food in their new home. The Iroquois absorbed buckwheat into their range of witchcraft materials.

Buckwheat helps to loosen heavy soil and at the same time it will choke out weeds to such an extent that eventually they will be eradicated. It also absorbs large quantities of calcium which, when ploughed into the ground with green matter, will progressively enrich the soil.

Today its cultivation in Europe is increasing again and this has already led to limited production of what is described as a very tasty flour which is not used so much for bread as for crumpets and cakes. It is being widely grown in the United States, Canada and Russia. In the United States and Canada the flour is particularly chosen for pancakes and in Russia it is made into a porridge (*kasha*). While in Brittany in northern France buckwheat pancakes have long been a local specialty. Indian Hindus eat it on fasting days and the Chinese (especially those in Malaysia) have included buckwheat in invalids' diets. Buckwheat is also cultivated for food in Brazil and parts of Africa.

Buckwheat can be pollinated by over 40 different kinds of insect, including the honey-bee and for the latter apiarists used to grow this cereal around beehives. In the past in Britain buckwheat has been viewed as animal feed such as grazing for sheep, and has also been grown and left standing as food for pheasants. It has also been fed to poultry.

It has been used to make beer, spirits and cordials.

Today buckwheat is an important crop for honey (which is dark and has a distinctive flavour) and it is used in homoeopathic treatments.