

Ferula assa-foetida

[Synonyms : *Asafoetida narthex*, *Ferula foetida*]

ASAFETIDA (English, Finnish, Russian, Swedish) is a perennial. Native to western Iran, western Afghanistan and to Turkistan, it has tiny greenish-yellow flowers.

It is also known as *Asafétida* (Spanish), *Asafetide* (French), *Asant* (German), *Assafetida* (Italian), *Assa-foetida* (French), *Badhika* (Sanskrit), Devil's dung, *Duivelsdrek* (Dutch), *Dyvets drekk* (Norwegian), *Dyvelsträck* (Swedish), *Ferolo asafetida* (Esperanto), *Ferula*, Food of the gods, Gum asafetida, *Hengu* (Oriya), *Hing* (Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Marathi, Punjabi, Urdu), *Hinger* (Kannada), *Hingu* (Sanskrit), *Inguva* (Telugu), *Mvuje* (Swahili), *Ordögyökér* (Hungarian), *Perungayam* (Malayalam, Tamil), Stinking gum, *Teufelsdreck* (German), and *Yang* (Kashmiri).

4-5 year old roots of plants that have not flowered are dug up in early Summer and cut to release the milky juice that solidifies upon exposure to air. It is traded either in this brownish (sometimes pinkish-tinted) gummy state, or it is divided into lumps (this latter is considered to have a purer flavour) or ground to powder. Essence is extracted by steam distillation, a process that also removes the garlic-like smell.

Warning – handling the resin or oils can occasionally cause dermatitis in some people.

Assa-foetida is derived from Persian *aza* (mastic resin) and Latin *foetida* (stinking) components, a name which has been used since the 14th Century and has become familiar in several European languages including Latin, English, Italian, Spanish and French.

The Romans had been using silphium (also known as *laserpitium*) as a condiment. This was a rubbery resin which had been extracted from a plant thought to have been a little like a wild carrot (*Daucus carota*), that was imported from the former Greek colony of Cyrene in North Africa. This could be purchased at the same price as gold – and had originally been used as a medicine. It has never been identified and in the middle of the 1st Century it just disappeared – suddenly.

Asafetida, extracted from a more common plant than found in Persia (now Iran), appeared in the Roman markets to take silphium's place. In 2 AD Alexandria was levying taxes on asafetida – which gives some indication of its economic importance.

By the Middle Ages it was being used by Arabian physicians. It had even come to the notice of the extremities of north-western Europe as by the 13th Century the Welsh doctors of Myddvai are said to have considered it to be a significant medical substance. Now it is rarely found in the European Continent.

It is still used as a flavouring in its native habitat in the Middle East and environments of similar climate. The brownish gum is strongly fetid but, in very small quantities, adds a special flavour to food. Asafetida was used as a condiment in Persia where it was known as the 'food of the gods', and it has been used similarly in India for a very long time particularly in vegetable dishes. The raw plant leaves are also eaten locally.

On its home ground asafetida was, and still is, worn round the neck (like garlic, *Allium sativum*) as a protection from infectious diseases, particularly colds. Commentators suggest however that its effectiveness in this role is only achieved to the extent that its smell would keep infectious people at bay.

Apparently gun dogs seem to find it difficult to distinguish asafetida's smell from that of a fox.

As a result North American sportsmen, enthusiastic to 'ride to hounds', will sometimes lay a false trail by dragging a rag soaked in a solution of the resin.

Asafetida has also been used in veterinary medicine in India especially.

The gum resin is a commercial ingredient in Worcestershire sauce (pronounced 'Wooster' in Britain), and is used in veterinary medicine. The essence provides a fixative for the perfumery industry.

Medicinally, the plant has not attracted much attention in the West although it was once used to treat infantile pneumonia and flatulent colic. Today it can be employed there in tablet form for treating some nervous disorders, as well as asthma, bronchitis and whooping-cough. It has also been used locally in India, especially, to treat cholera, indigestion, wind and spasms.