

Foeniculum vulgare subsp. *dulce*

[Synonyms : *Anethum foeniculum*, *Foeniculum dulce*, *Foeniculum foeniculum*, *Foeniculum officinale*, *Foeniculum vulgare*]

FENNEL is a biennial or perennial. Native to Asia Minor and the Mediterranean it has tiny, yellow flowers.

It is also known as *Adas* (Javanese), *Adas pedas* (Malay), *Anis doux* (French), *Badi-shep* (Marathi), *Badi-sopu* (Kannada), *Bata-enduru* (Singhalese), Bitter fennel, *Busbies* (Maltese), Common fennel, Devil-in-a-bush, Dill, *Divi-duru* (Singhalese), *Édeskömény* (Hungarian), *Enduru* (Singhalese), *Fänkål* (Swedish), *Fänkaol* (Swedish), *Fänkol* (Swedish), *Fanon* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Fanoué* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Fenchel* (German), *Fenikel obyčajný* (Slovak), Fenkel, *Fenkolo* (Esperanto), *Fenkolo ordinara* (Esperanto), *Fennikel* (Danish, Norwegian), *Fenouil* (French), *Fenykl obecný* (Czech), *Ffenigl Cyffredin* (Welsh), Finkel (English, German), Finkle, *Finocchio* (Italian), *Funcho* (Portuguese), *Fyenkhel'* (Russian), Garden fennel, Giant fennel, Green and bronze fennel, *Hades* (Sundanese), *Hinojo* (Spanish), *Hui-hsiang* (Chinese), *Jinten manis* (Indonesian), *Knollenfenchel* (German), Large fennel, *Madhurika* (Sanskrit), *Maha-duru* (Singhalese), Meeting seed, *Pan-muhiri* (Bengali), *Peddajilakara* (Telugu), *Perum-jeerakam* (Malayalam), *Rezene* (Turkish), *Římský kopr* (Czech), *Saunf* (Hindi, Punjabi), *Shamar* (Arabic), *Shamari* (Swahili), *She-bint* (Arabic), *Shev-ed* (Persian), *Shombei* (Tamil), *Shoo-wit* (Persian), *Sladký kopr* (Czech), *Sopu* (Telugu), Spignel, Spingel, Sweet anise, Sweet carduus fennel, Sweet fennel, *Uikyo* (Japanese), *Variari* (Gujarati), *Venkel* (Dutch), *Venkoli* (Finnish), *Vlašský kopr* (Czech), Wild fennel, and *Yi ra* (Thai); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of strength, and 'worthy of all praise'.

Essential oil is extracted from the root.

Warning – very large doses especially of the oil can affect the nervous system (causing hallucinations and fits.). Handling the plant can cause dermatitis and make the skin extremely sensitive to sunlight. Animals that consume it become timid.

Vulgare means 'common'. *Dulce* is Latin (sweet, pleasant, delightful).

The ancient Greeks called fennel *marathon* derived from their word for 'to grow thin' *maraino*, and this may confirm their knowledge of its ability to aid what today we call 'slimming' regimes. In the Middle Ages in Britain *foeniculum* was corrupted to 'fenkel'.

It is one of the oldest plants in cultivation and has been used for culinary purposes for at least 2,500 years. In earlier times the emphasis on its use in the kitchen was on the stem whereas today greater value is placed on the seed.

The ancient Greeks recognized fennel as a symbol of success and after their victory at Marathon are said to have re-christened it *marathon*. Both they and the Romans valued its medicinal properties and even at that time used it not only in 'slimming diets' but also gave it to athletes as they believed it strengthened them without adding weight. Amongst many of the old herbalists fennel also had a name for being able to improve poor eyesight.

In the 8th Century Charlemagne (747-814), king of the Franks and Christian emperor of the West, was promoting the cultivation and use of fennel (and many other plants) in central

Europe. 10th Century Spanish records show that fennel was part of their agricultural scene at that time, while further north Britain had certainly become familiar with fennel before the Norman Conquest in the 11th Century as records show that the Anglo-Saxons used fennel in cookery and medicine.

For Christian lore the plant is associated with the Virgin Mary.

Fennel, with chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*), crab apple (*Malus baccata*), greater plantain (*Plantago major*), mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*), stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*), thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*), watercress (*Nasturtium officinale*), and wood betony (*Stachys officinalis*), was one of the Nine Sacred Herbs for the Anglo-Saxons. (The ninth is thought by some to have been sainfoin, *Onobrychis viciifolia*.) They believed the plants could give protection against evil. In the following centuries bunches of fennel could be found hanging in English homes and over doors at Midsummer to ward off evil spirits and witches. Keyholes were filled with the seeds to keep out ghosts and many of these practices were accompanied by special incantations.

But in Britain in the Middle Ages fennel's magical powers were only part of its perceived attributes. Fennel was used for strewing and it was also valued for its digestive qualities. The latter probably led to the practice of eating the seeds to fend off hunger during fasting periods in the Christian Church's calendar (a practice upheld discreetly in later years by the North American Puritans during their long church services). The seeds were also added as a flavouring to the monotonous salt fish, especially during the Lenten period.

It may well have been these customs no doubt long familiar to European church-goers by the 16th Century, whereby hunger was only allayed not satisfied, that explained a European term of that period used particularly in Italy – 'to give fennel' – meaning to flatter ie. to pay a hollow compliment. The celebrated English playwrights, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) and Ben Jonson (1572-1637) both used this device in *Hamlet* and *The Case Altered* respectively. In the former Ophelia offers it to Laertes insincerely just after the crowd has urged him to take the crown of Denmark ie.

There's fennel for you, and columbines;

and in the latter Christopher adopts it as part of an address directed at another character. Not only does this indicate the audiences' familiarity with the plant but also the cynical context in which it is used in both examples – a practice maintained to this day according to some authorities in the Cockney term 'flannel' ie. to pay a hollow compliment.

The plant came to be known to some of the North American Indian tribes. It seems that, although the Hopi tribe viewed it as a substitute for tobacco other tribes may have looked upon it primarily as a source of medicine. Certainly some of the Pomo Indians chewed the seeds to ease indigestion and stomach problems, and they also made them into an eye wash. The Cherokee prescribed a tonic made from the plant for children suffering from wind or colds – and this tonic was also given to women in labour.

Fennel's medicinal reputation is well celebrated by the American poet, Henry Longfellow (1807-1882) –

Above the lowly plants it towers,
The fennel with its yellow flowers,
And in an earlier age than ours
Was gifted with the wondrous powers -
Lost vision to restore.
It gave men strength and fearless mood,
And gladiators fierce and rude
Mingled it with their daily food:
And he who battled and subdued

A wreath of fennel wore.

His English peer, Robert Browning (1812-1889) refers to fennel in his poem *Two in the Campagna*.

For me, I touched a thought, I know,
Has tantalized me

Help me to hold it! First it left
The yellowing fennel, run to seed
There, branching from the brickwork's cleft,
Some old tomb's ruin; yonder weed
Took up the floating weft,

It also provided a cosmetic aid for wrinkles, and was considered to be an aphrodisiac.

Fennel can be found in the kitchens of many countries today. It is an ingredient in a traditional Ethiopian sauce. In France it is used in preserves, as an accompaniment for fish, as a garnish for sauces, and a decoration for puddings. It is fed to rabbits in Italy in order to flavour their meat – while the French Bretons use fennel to cure a rabbit's colic. The seeds are one of the elements in the traditional 'Five Spices' [the other ingredients are aniseed (*Pimpinella anisum*), cinnamon (*Cinnamomum verum*), clove (*Syzygium aromaticum*) and star anise (*Illicium verum*)] familiar in Chinese cooking. They are also used as flavouring in oriental curries. In India fennel is particularly esteemed as a digestive aid and the seeds are often served, whole or ground, at the end of a meal. The roots are one of the ingredients (with those of butcher's-broom (*Ruscus aculeatus*), garden parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*), garden asparagus (*Asparagus officinalis*) and celery (*Apium graveolens* var. *dulce*)) in a celebrated liqueur called Five Roots Liqueur

Under country lore and also the tenets of companion planting that seem to be experiencing a revival fennel should not be planted near dill (*Anethum graveolens*) in order to avoid cross pollination. It is also said that fennel can inhibit the growth of some plants eg. dwarf beans (*Phaseolus vulgaris*), caraway (*Carum carvi*) or tomatoes (*Solanum lycopersicum*) if it is too near them.

The powdered plant is said to be able to deter fleas.

Today oil of fennel is used as a commercial flavouring by the drinks industry (particularly in cordials and liqueurs) and by the food industry too (especially in confectionery, condiments, pickles, sausages and honey). It also provides a flavouring for proprietary medicines for the pharmaceutical industry. Fennel is an ingredient as well for the perfumery, toiletry (in soap and toothpaste) and cosmetics industries (steam facials, anti-wrinkle cream).

Medicinally, herbalists used fennel to treat snake bites (a remedy still relied upon in China today), mushroom poisoning and scorpion bites. (Some also claimed that it could restore lost sight.) Nowadays fennel is often used to treat wind in adults and children, and it is recognized generally as an aid to digestion.

It is the birthday flower for 5th December.