

Glycyrrhiza glabra

[Synonyms : *Glycyrrhiza glabra* subsp. *glandulifera*, *Glycyrrhiza glabra* subsp. *caduca*, *Glycyrrhiza glabra* subsp. *glandulosa*, *Glycyrrhiza glabra* subsp. *laxifoliolata*, *Glycyrrhiza glabra* subsp. *violacea*, *Glycyrrhiza glandulifera*, *Glycyrrhiza hirsuta*, *Glycyrrhiza violacea*, *Liquiritis officinalis*]

LIQUORICE is a perennial. Found from southern Europe to West Pakistan it has small pea-like, lilac-blue or yellowish flowers.

It is also known as *Alcaçuz* (Portuguese), Anatolian liquorice, *Athimaduram* (Tamil), *Athimathuram* (Tamil), *Atimadhura* (Kannada), *Atimaduram* (Sinhalese, Tamil), *Atimaduramu* (Telugu), *Atimaturam* (Tamil), *Bärendreck* (German), Black sugar, *Bois doux* (French), *Cam thảo* (Vietnamese), *Ciimaiyatimaturam* (Tamil), Common licorice, Cultivated licorice, *Echtes Süssholz* (German), *Gemeines Süssholz* (German), *Glykoriza* (Greek), *Guang guo gan cao* (Chinese), *Gurukiruriza gurabura* (Japanese), *Iratimadhuram* (Malayalam), *Jashti-madhu* (Bengali), *Jesthamadha* (Marathi), *Jethimadh* (Gujarati, Hindi), *Koren solodki* (Russian), *Lakrichnik* (Russian), *Lakrids* (Danish), *Lakrisrot* (Norwegian), *Lakrits* (Swedish), *Lakritsi* (Finnish), *Lakritsijuuri* (Finnish), *Lakritsrot* (Swedish), *Lakritze* (German), *Lakritzeholz* (German), *Lakritzenwurzel* (German), *Lakritzpflanze* (German), *Lékořice lysá* (Czech), Licorice, Licorice fern, Licorice root, *Liquerizia* (Italian), *Madhuuka* (Sanskrit), *Malathi* (Punjabi), *Meyan kökü* (Turkish), *Mingamtscho* (Korean), *Mulethi* (Hindi), *Muleti* (Punjabi), *Mulletti* (Hindi), *Mulhathi* (Hindi), *Mulhati* (Hindi), *Mulhatti* (Hindi), *Noekiyu* (Burmese), *Orozuz* (Spanish), *Paloduz* (Spanish), Persian liquorice, *Ragaliz* (Spanish), *Réglisse* (French), *Réglisse glabra* (French), *Regolizia* (Italian), Russian liquorice, *Saem* (Laotian), *Shirin bayan* (Persian), *Shush* (Hebrew), *Shush kireah* (Hebrew), *Sladké dřevo* (Czech), *Sladké drievko* (Slovak), *Sladki koren* (Slovenian), *Sladki korijen* (Croatian), *Soethout* (Afrikaans), *Solodka gladkaia* (Russian), *Solodka golaia* (Russian), *Spanisches Süssholz* (German), Spanish juice, Spanish licorice, Stick of Spanish, *Süs. maikük* (Kurdish), *Süssholz* (German), *Süssholzwurzel* (German), *Susu* (Swahili), Sweet licorice, Sweet wood, Syrian liquorice, True licorice, *Yang gan cao* (Chinese), *Yashti-madhu* (Sanskrit), *Yashtimadhukam* (Kannada, Malayalam), *Yasthimadhu* (Kannada, Sanskrit), *Yoshtimadhu* (Sanskrit), *You kanzou* (Japanese), and *Zoethout* (Dutch); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of 'I declare against you' (wild).

The roots of mature plants are dug up in early Winter and washed and dried in sunshine.

Industrially bundles of straight pieces of roots are sold as they are, and the essence is extracted from the remaining yellow root. This is boiled and filtered and then allowed to solidify and formed into black sticks.

Warning – strong doses have a laxative effect. Large doses can lead to headaches, fluid retention, high blood pressure, muscle contractions, convulsions and shortness of breath.

The plant should not be taken if suffering from abnormal blood pressure.

Trade demands for liquorice in Europe (and North America) are such that it has been the subject of over harvesting. By the end of the 1990s its future survival in the wild was considered to be threatened in those countries.

Glabra is Latin (hairless, bald) meaning 'hairless or smooth'.

Liquorice has been used medicinally for 3,000 years and references to it appear in Assyrian tablets, as well as the Chinese, Egyptian and Indian papyri. The founder of the Buddhist religion, Prince Siddhartha Gautama (c.563-c.483 BC), known as Buddha, is said to have included liquorice in his sacred bathing rituals. Ancient Greeks learnt about liquorice from the Scythians and the Greek philosopher Theophrastus (c.372-c.287 BC) makes reference to this species. Later in the 1st Century AD his compatriot, the physician Dioscorides is believed to have been familiar not only with this plant but also a close relative and named the plant *Glycyrrhiza*. It seems that at that time a liquorice extract was a common medicine as it was also to be much later in Germany during the Middle Ages. Then in England there are the Wardrobe Accounts of Henry III who reigned from 1216-1272. These include an item for liquorice (the extract it would seem and not the root) showing that it was not completely unknown by then in those offshore Islands either.

Records suggest that the plant (which contains a substance called *glycyrrhizin* that is 50 times sweeter than sugar) was cultivated in central and western Europe from about the 10th Century and in Italy in particular from the 15th Century.

The plant was introduced to the Pontefract area in England by the mendicant preaching order of Dominican Black Friars in about the 16th Century. It should be mentioned that there are some authorities who debate this and suggest it was introduced by the Romans or, more likely, Crusaders returning home from their battles in the Middle East. But the mendicant connection is recalled with the traditional English liquorice Pontefract cakes or pomfrets (possibly first made in 1614 as a medicine), pastilles or small liquorice sticks. Liquorice could then be seen growing in gardens and fields in other parts of the Country as its popularity increased there. Later in continental Europe it became less popular as the citrus groves spread and it was pulled out as a weed. And, in England in 1960 the last commercial crop was harvested in Pontefract – although the town continues to hold its annual Pontefract Liquorice Festival.

In France in the 18th and 19th Centuries the street sellers known as *marchand de coco* sold cheap liquorice water ie. *coco*. In streets and public gardens they dispensed this in small goblets from a cask carried on their backs. It is described as a refreshing drink that looks like coconut milk (*Cocos nucifera*) and is made by steeping or infusing sticks of liquorice in water and adding lemon juice.

Today sticks of wild dried root are sold in many Asian and Middle Eastern countries for chewing as a sweetmeat. While in western Europe the confectioners manufacture liquorice sweets particularly in Denmark and the Netherlands, as well as in Britain where such long familiar names as ‘Liquorice Allsorts’ are popular especially with children.

Most root imported into Britain today comes from India, Spain and Russia. It is an ingredient in Guinness and increases the head of foam on the beer. It can also be used to blacken and thicken stout (and was added to port to with similar aims in mind). The liquorice sweets sold in North America obtain their flavour from aniseed (*Pimpinella anisum*) but those in England are made with strong liquorice extracts. Most liquorice imported into North America is used for flavouring tobacco mixtures. Liquorice is also used to sweeten and flavour medicines.

The plant came to be known to some of the North American Indian tribes and records indicate that it was absorbed into the medicinal repertoire of the Cherokee and Meskwaki Indians. The former used it to treat asthma, coughs and hoarseness, and the latter included it as an ingredient in a compound used to treat some female disorders.

In veterinary medicine records show that it has been used in the treatment of certain horse ailments.

Today a summary of the commercial use of liquorice would be diverse and include the drinks industry for which it provides a flavouring ingredient in some beers eg. Guinness, bitters

and herbal beverages. In Japan it can provide sweetening to balance the saltiness of soy sauce. It is also a flavouring ingredient in various tobaccos for cigarettes, cigars and pipe mixtures. Liquorice accounts for as much as 10% of some snuffs and is used in the manufacture of confectionery too. The pharmaceutical industry uses it primarily in proprietary cough-relieving preparations and as a flavouring in other medicines. For the toiletry industry it has been used in soap and provides a flavouring in breath fresheners, and toothpastes and powders too. Root pulp is not only an ingredient in insulating mill board but is also part of mushroom compost. And last here, but by no means least, liquorice can be employed as a foam stabilizer in fire extinguishers.

Medicinally, herbalists recommended liquorice for consumption, coughs and general chest ailments. It was also used to allay thirst. Today it is the subject of much pharmacological research that is leading to new medicinal applications. Liquorice is still an ingredient in medicines for some respiratory disorders, particularly coughs, and is also used in treating asthma and internal ulcers. In India they use it to treat scorpion stings. In China it is part of remedies for liver diseases and it is an aid in easing nausea and vomiting. It is understood to rival only ginseng (*Panax ginseng*) in popularity of use there. The Japanese use liquorice for the treatment of hepatitis.