

### *Illicium verum*

[Synonyms : *Illicium san-ki*]

**STAR ANISE** is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to southern and south-eastern China and north-eastern Vietnam, it has magnolia-like, reddish inside flowers that are pink on the outside.

It is also known as *Anice stellato* (Italian), Aniseed stars, *Anis étoilé* (French), *Badian* (German), *Badiana* (English, Spanish), *Badiane* (French), *Badyán* (Czech), *Badyáník pravý* (Czech), *Badyánovník pravý* (Czech), *Badyán pravý* (Czech), Chinese anise, Chinese star anise, *Echter Sternanis* (German), *Ilcio vera* (Esperanto), Siberian cardamom, Star anise tree, *Sternanis* (German), *Stjärnanis* (Swedish), *Tähtianis* (Finnish), and Yellow-flowered starry aniseed tree of China.

The fruit are collected when green and dried in the sun until woody and reddish-brown. The fruit are steam-distilled to obtain a colourless or very pale yellow oil that has the same properties as those of aniseed (*Pimpinella anisum*) but congeals at a lower temperature. The seeds are stored in sealed containers to retain their qualities.

Warning – toothpastes containing star anise can cause chapped lips.

Star anise has a similar appearance to that of the poisonous Japanese star anise (*Illicium anisatum*). In the East it has occasionally been adulterated with its poisonous close relative, Japanese star anise.

*Verum* is Latin (true, genuine) meaning ‘true or standard’ with reference to the species as typical of the genus.

The fruit came to be christened Siberian cardamom because they reached western Europe via the overland Chinese-Russian tea route in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

Star anise has been a culinary flavouring in the East for a very long time. The Chinese, who have used it since at least 100 BC have added it to tea or coffee and traditionally have cooked it with pork or duck as a flavouring. It is one of the ‘Five Spices’ [the others are aniseed (*Pimpinella anisum*), cinnamon (*Cinnamomum verum*), clove (*Syzygium aromaticum*) and fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare var. dulce*)] familiar in Chinese cooking. In other parts of Asia it is used to flavour hotly-spiced food and sauces.

The first sample to be seen in Europe is said to have arrived in London from the Philippines in 1588. (It was brought back by Sir Thomas Cavendish (c.1555-c.1591) when he returned from his 1586 expedition to the Pacific.) By 1694 it was no longer unusual for the Dutch to flavour their tea with this spice, yet elsewhere on the European Continent it was still little known. As a substitute for the more expensive European aniseed oil (*Pimpinella anisum*) star anise has since been well appreciated by many Western commercial operations. However in relatively recent times politics has intervened – for instance France long relied upon star anise for flavouring her liqueur, *anisette*. That is until the 1970s when she experienced a price hike of 2000% in two years. Her two sources were North Vietnam which had been affected by war and southern China whose relations with Russia, through which the shipments passed, had deteriorated significantly.

An unusual application was found for star anise in Japan. In the temples here it was burnt as a chronometer to signal the time for bell-ringing.

Today the oil (often called 'oil of anise') is an important commercial substitute for expensive European aniseed oil (*Pimpinella anisum*) in drinks and liqueurs eg. anisette, ouzo. It is used by the food industry eg. in baked foods, and it is also used in toothpastes, chewing gum and tobacco as a flavouring.

Medicinally, star anise can be chewed to counter bad breath and encourage digestion. It has also long been used (especially in the East) to flavour medicines. In Chinese medicine it has been familiar for centuries, especially in the treatment of rheumatism. It is used nowadays in the West in cough remedies and also in homoeopathic treatments.