

Juglans regia

[Synonyms : *Juglans duclouxiana*, *Juglans fallax*, *Juglans kamaonia*, *Juglans orientis*, *Juglans regalis*, *Juglans regia* var. *sinensis*, *Juglans sinensis*]

WALNUT is a deciduous tree. Native to western Asia, to China, south-eastern Europe and to the Himalayas, it has greenish catkins.

It is also known as *Akhrot* (Bengali, Hindi, Urdu), *Akroda* (Marathi), *Akrottu* (Tamil, Telugu), *Akschota* (Sanskrit), *Äkta Valnöt* (Swedish), *Baumness* (German), Black walnut, Caucasian walnut, *Cazyra*, *Ceviz ag* (Turkish), Circassian walnut, *Coeden Cnau Ffrengig* (Welsh), Common Persian walnut, Common walnut, *Echte Walnuss* (German), *Echte Walnussbaum* (German), English walnut, European walnut, French nut, Italian walnut, *Jawîz* (Turkish), Jove's acorns, *Jöz* (Arabic), *Juglando reĝa* (Esperanto), Jupiter's nuts, Madeira walnut, *Noce* (Italian), *Nogal* (Spanish), *Nogueira* (Portuguese), *Noix* (French), *Noyer commun* (French), *Noyer royal* (French), *Nussbaum* (German), *Nux regia*, *Orech vlašský* (Slovak), *Ořešák královský* (Czech), Persian walnut, *Saksanpähkinä* (Finnish), Tenten, *Valnøld* (Danish), *Valnöt* (Swedish), *Valnötsträd* (Swedish), *Vlašský ořech* (Czech), *Walnuss* (German), *Walnussbaum* (German), Walnut-tree, and Welsh nut; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of contagion (branch), intellect, longevity, presentiment, and stratagem.

Warning – the leaf extract can blister skin.

Regia is Latin (royal, regal) meaning 'royal or princely'.

The tree has been a source of timber and food for thousands of years. Of relevant archaeological finds the oldest walnut remains are said to have been found in what is now Iraq, and they have also been found in the area of the Swiss Lake villages at Robenhausen in the European Alps – and the latter date back to about 8000 BC (the beginning of the Middle Stone Age). It is believed that the Greek philosopher, Theophrastus (c.372-c.287 BC) mentions walnut in his works (if authorities note that is what he meant by *karuon*), and there are also references to the walnut in the writings of the Roman scholar, Varro (116-27 BC). Believed by Pliny (23-79), the celebrated Roman natural historian, to have entered Europe from Persia (Iran) the tree is now cultivated for its timber. From the foregoing it will be apparent that walnut could have been introduced to Europe thousands of years ago, whereas it seems only to have reached China during the Former or Western Han dynasty (202 BC-8 AD) in about 100 BC – probably via Kashmir on the boundaries of northern India.

In Greek and Roman times the walnut was believed to be a cure for headaches because of the brain-like appearance of the kernel. [This theory was to be taken one stage further in western Europe under the Doctrine of Signatures that was particularly fashionable in the 16th Century when for similar reasons the walnut was believed to be a cure for brain disorders.] Both the ancient Greeks and the Romans viewed the fruit (called an 'acorn' by the latter) as a symbol of fertility and they served it at feasts and wedding celebrations. The Romans also buried a gold coin under a walnut tree's roots as an offering to the goddess of fruit trees (and their fruit), Pomona.

The Greeks prized the walnuts for their oil – but it was the Romans who particularly enjoyed eating them and are credited with promoting and introducing the tree to other parts of

Europe where its joys were not yet appreciated. However although the trees have been growing in the Grésivaudan region of France since the 4th Century it is thought by many that it is unlikely they crossed the Channel to England before the mid-15th Century at the earliest. [Schools of thought are actually divided as to when the walnut was introduced to England. Two distinct times are mooted, either during the Roman occupation from the 1st Century or in the 16th Century. Those who subscribe to the latter contend this is the first period when records in any number mention its existence in that Country.] Nevertheless documentary evidence suggests local English economy was placing some reliance upon walnut trees in the late 13th Century and walnuts feature in one of the earliest known recorded English recipes (dating from about 1430) for a fish dish with a walnut sauce. Thus the nuts could have been exported to the south of England from the European mainland in significant quantities long before the trees followed them.

Before pursuing this further however their involvement in French life should perhaps be examined a little. As with so many other plants Charlemagne (747-814), who was king of the Franks and Christian emperor of the west, encouraged the growth of walnut trees and at this time walnuts (the nuts) were used mainly as a flavouring. The continuing importance of walnuts is well illustrated from records that show for example that in the 11th Century walnut harvests (walnuts were then a staple food amongst the poor – like the chestnut, *Castanea sativa*) could attract a tithe in the Dordogne region that the peasants could pay in a proportion of the walnuts gathered. Then in the 13th and 14th Centuries rich Parisians were fond of using walnut oil for flavouring food so the walnuts had to come flooding in from other parts of the Country for crushing – and the nuts were also in great demand, not just for themselves but also for preparing puddings and for making a paste for flavouring and thickening sauces, soups and stews. At the same time until about the early 19th Century walnuts, like almonds (*Prunus dulcis* var. *dulcis*), were used in many homes to make a kind of ‘milk’.

It is likely that the tree was introduced to North America by early colonists ie. the 16th Century onwards, but the walnut did not grow there successfully until the new settlements became well-established in suitable climates in Oregon and California. In the last half of the 20th Century this latter area has caused consternation in France. The French in the Grenoble area (where the trees have been cultivated since at least the 4th Century) have long exported a large part of their walnut crop. By the 1970s however competition from California and Oregon was such that it was threatening their livelihoods – not least because of the demanding quality controls imposed upon the French by their own government.

As a food today walnut features in several national dishes particularly some from the Middle East. In western Europe and the United States however it appears to have lost some of its importance as an ingredient, although it is making a comeback to a certain extent in vegetarian dishes.

Under the lore of companion planting the walnut was not positioned near the oak (*Quercus*) as it was thought that either one would wither and die. Apparently the trees can be readily grown from fresh nuts but finding any, according to one authority, can be a race between man and the squirrel as the latter will hoard the hard-shelled, light brown fruit avidly for the Winter (later forgetting where many of the secret caches were left). Then there is the English saying about encouraging the tree to fruit –

A woman, a steak and a walnut tree,
More you beat'em, better they be.

Walnut oil extracted from the kernel does not congeal in the cold. For this reason it was used by artists to mix gold-size and varnish with delicate colours or white. The oil has also been used for lamps and for cooking.

The bark has been used for tanning.

Despite the time it must have taken for the walnut to feel at home on the North American Continent records indicate that it did come to be known to a few North American Indian tribes. The Navajo tribe used the nut-shells to obtain a golden-brown dye.

Husks and leaves yield an insecticide that has also been used as a repellent. And the brown dye obtained from the leaves has been used by gypsies to stain their skin. It was an ingredient in remedies for baldness some of which, taken internally, were believed at the same time to turn the hair a blonde colour. A dye for darkening hair has also been obtained from the shells. Today this dye is added to skin tanning creams.

It is claimed that in France one can see today a striking example of walnut's staining tenacity. During the French Revolution in the early 19th Century a warehouse full of walnuts in the Lozère region of south-eastern France was burnt down. The oily smoke was so thick that it accounts, even now, for the bad discolouration of the nearby cliffs of La Barre.

The wood was sought after by furniture craftsmen, and when used for this purpose or for house interiors eg. panelling, it was and still is usually referred to as French, Italian, Turkish or Circassian walnut. One fascinating use for walnut wood mentioned by some authorities was in building airships in Britain.

The walnut has played its part in literature. It is mentioned in a couple of the plays of the famous English playwright and poet, William Shakespeare (1564-1616). In *The Merry Wives of Windsor* Mr. Ford searches the house for his wife's lover,

..... if I find not what I seek, show no colour for my extremity;
let me for ever be your table-sport; let them say of me, "As jealous as
Ford, that searched a hollow walnut for his wife's leman."

and in *The Taming of the Shrew* Petruchio scorns a cap brought to him by a haberdasher
.....'t is lewd and filthy.

Why, 't is a cockle or a walnut-shell,
A knack, a toy, a trick, a baby's cap;
Away with it!

The roots of one particular proverb that is associated with the walnut tree and still heard today could, arguably, be traced back to the writings of the famous Roman orator, Cicero (106-43 BC).

Walnuts and pears you plant for your heirs.

In other words the trees grow so slowly that they are enjoyed by future generations (although authorities note that modern varieties of pear (*Pyrus*) fruit after a few years).

Today this greyish-brown timber is still prized for decorative veneering and panelling, as well as for making furniture, gunstocks and musical instruments. The nut oil can still be used in artists' non-drying paints and as a cooking oil. Fluid extract from the leaves and nutshells can be an ingredient in suntan oil and hair dyes. The green, undried hulls can be used as a flavouring in an alcoholic walnut drink. The leaves (and occasionally the fresh fruit wall) can provide ingredients for some proprietary medicines.

Medicinally, herbalists used the walnut for treating bites from rabid dogs (and other poisonous creatures), for gangrenous wounds and for carbuncles. It was also used to treat skin diseases such as herpes, and eczema, as well as skin ulcers. The bark was used as a purgative, and a gargle made from the fruit was recommended for sore throats. Today walnut is used in homoeopathic treatments

It is the birthday 'flower' for 15th March.