

Lens culinaris

[Synonyms : *Cicer lens*, *Ervum lens*, *Lens esculenta*, *Lens lens*, *Vicia lens*]

LENTIL is a cultivated annual. Probably from eastern Mediterranean, to Iraq (particularly Syria), it has tiny pea-like, lilac-veined, bluish-white flowers.

It is also known as *Adas* (Arabic), *Åkerlins* (Swedish), *Čočka jedlá* (Czech), *Čočka kuchyňská* (Czech), *Ghazz* (Maltese), *Lantejas* (Spanish), *Lentille* (French), *Lins* (Swedish), *Linse* (German), *Linssi* (Finnish), *Marjamuk* (Turkish), *Masar* (Punjabi), *Masur* (Hindi and Sanskrit), *Masura* (Marathi), *Masuri* (Bengali), *Misurpappu* (Telugu), *Misurpurpu* (Tamil), and Split pea..

Split and de-husked commercially, the seeds usually have an orange or reddish colour.

Culinaris means ‘suitable for cooking or edible’.

Before about 10,000 BC man had not mastered farming and was still obtaining food as a gatherer, hunter and fisher. Wild lentils were collected from the wild in the Near East and parts of Europe (and some authorities claim Middle America as well). By 8000 BC however they were one of the crops that were beginning to be cultivated.

Lentils were used to make the ‘mess of pottage’ for which in the *Bible* Esau was prepared to trade his birthright. Authorities muse on the seeming little value Esau placed on his birthright at the time as the lentil dish would actually have been a common food for many Hebrews.

The ancient Greeks consumed large amounts of lentils and amongst other things used them to make a paste called *puls*.

The Romans also placed lentils high in their diet and in the form of a soup they were a staple for the Roman legions. Shipments of lentils were imported from Egypt to Rome. It is said that the Roman Emperor, Heliogabalus (c. 204-222), who led a profligate life during his four years in power before he was murdered by the praetorian guards, mixed his lentils with precious stones.

In India by about 2000 BC lentil cultivation was widespread. (Curry was originally and long viewed in India as a tasty sauce for wheaten pancakes (*Triticum*) or rice (*Oryza*), the recipe for which varied from family to family and in pre-medieval times could well have included cooked lentils.) Today she is said to produce a third of the world’s lentil crop.

Lentils spread gradually to northern Europe and then in the early 17th Century they suffered a period when they were viewed with disdain and generally considered only suitable for horse fodder. However this attitude changed rapidly in the same Century and the following one. In France with the French Revolution and in what is now Germany at least, they became a basic component of a solid diet. And in Christian Countries generally they formed an appreciated standby during the Lenten period of abstinence. Today in Europe lentils are experiencing some renewed slight interest in that they can appear in vegetarian diets and some of the more trendy dishes served up by modern chefs.

Records indicate that the seeds were not unknown to some North American Indians – and they provided food for parts of the Tohono O’Odham Indian tribe.

In some countries the leaves and stems provide fodder.

The ‘lens’ in a magnifying glass or camera was so called as it is thought to copy the shape of a lentil seed.

Medicinally, the seeds have been used locally to treat constipation and have been applied in the form of a paste to persistent ulcers.