

Mespilus germanica

[Synonyms : *Pyrus germanica*]

MEDLAR is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to Asia Minor and to south-eastern Europe, it has small, white or pink flowers with many dark stamens.

It is also known as *Asperl* (German), Dog's bottom, *Echte Mispel* (German), *Deutsche Mispel* (German), European medlar, *Fomm il-lipp* (Maltese), *Meilyi* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Mêlier* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Merysbren* (Welsh), Mespilo, *Mespilo Germania* (Esperanto), *Mispel* (German, Swedish), *Mispeli* (Finnish), *Mišpuľa obyčajná* (Slovak), *Mišpule německá* (Czech), *Mišpule obecná* (Czech), *Néfle* (French), *Nespola* (Italian), *Níspero* (Spanish), *Nispola* (Spanish), and Open-arse.

Unlike cultivated varieties the wild tree is thorny.

In temperate climates (outside its warmer native lands where the fruit are eaten ripe off the tree) the small, hard and woody, yellowish-brown fruit are harvested in late Autumn, stored in a single layer and left to decay (blett) so that the flesh turns soft and brown (over-ripe).

Warning – the powdered nutlets from the fruit should only be taken internally under the supervision of a qualified practitioner.

Germanica means 'of or from Germany'.

An accepted part of the diet in the Near East for over 2,000 years, the medlar has not only been eaten raw but has also provided an ingredient for baked puddings, and for jellies. It is believed that medlars were first cultivated by the Assyrians through whom they was introduced to the ancient Greeks. It was widely cultivated by the Romans and some authorities believe it was introduced to western Europe (including Britain) by them. The medlar used to be popular in European kitchens (no doubt because it would have been one of the very last fruits in the year to be harvested) particularly in the 16th Century when the over-ripe fruit were made into various puddings.

The medlar has attracted some superstition. In France for instance not only could it repel witches and magicians but it could also protect dwellings from magic spells.

The open end of the fruit has exercised the minds of past, celebrated members of the European literary world for ribald comment or association, among them the English poet Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1345-1400) and the playwright William Shakespeare (1564-1616). The former has Osewold the Reeve mention it as 'open-ers' in reference to old age, and Shakespeare's audiences must have been familiar with the medlar for them to appreciate Mercutio's bawdy repartee at the beginning of Act II of *Romeo and Juliet*

If love be blind, love cannot hit the mark.

Now will he sit under a medlar-tree,

And wish his mistress were that kind of fruit,

As maids call medlars, when they laugh alone. -

O Romeo! that she were, O! that she were

An open *et cetera*, thou a poprin pear!

The hard and flexible wood was once used to make whip handles.

Medicinally, not only did herbalists recommend the use of the medlar to stem bleeding and to heal wounds, and as an ingredient in a cure for kidney stones but it was also believed to be able to assist in improving the memory.

