

Nigella sativa

FENNEL FLOWER is an annual. Native to the Mediterranean (particularly Syria) it has small greenish or bluish tipped, white flowers.

It is also known as Allspice, Black caraway, Black cumin, Black cummin, Black seed, *Černucha setá* (Czech), Common love-in-a-mist, *Coreg otu* (Turkish), *Cuminella* (Italian), Cumin, Cumin black, *Cumin noir* (French), *Echter Schwarzkümmel* (German), *Erba spezies* (Italian), Gith, *Gittaione* (Italian), *Habbat-sōdā* (Arabic), *Jintan nitam*, *Kalanjire* (Marathi), *Kalijira* (Bengali), *Kalu-duru* (Singhalese), *Kalunji* (Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu), *Kalwanji* (Urdu), *Karamuk* (Turkish), *Karunjiragam* (Tamil), *Karunshiragam* (Malayalam), *Krishnajiraka* (Sanskrit), *Melanzio domestica* (Italian), *Mustakumina* (Finnish), *Nigella* (Italian), *Nigelle* (French), *Nulajilakara* (Telugu), Nutmeg flower, *Pasionara* (Spanish), *Poivrette* (French), *Quatre-épices* (French), *Rohtoneidonkukka* (Finnish), Roman coriander, Russian caraway, *Ryytineito* (Finnish), *Schwarzkümmel* (German), Small fennel flower, Small garden fennel, *Svartkummin* (Swedish), and *Toute épice* (French).

The seeds yield an unpleasant-smelling, yellow oil.

Warning – fennel flower can be an intestinal irritant if taken internally to excess and large doses should be avoided in pregnancy.

Sativa means ‘cultivated’.

The popularity of fennel flower among the Romans (they imported it from the Carthaginian coast, now Tunisia, and used it for cooking) is illustrated in the common name Roman coriander. (Confusion can arise in western Europe today when the seeds are misnamed ‘black caraway’ or ‘onion seeds’.)

The plant has been cultivated from at least 2000 BC by the Assyrians, and they and the Copts used the seeds medicinally. It has also been cultivated in Egypt from some time after the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt through to the present day although evidence of it in the tombs has been rare. Both the Hebrews and the ancient Greeks were familiar with it as well and are said to have used it medicinally.

Familiar in Britain since the 16th Century ground fennel flower seeds were popular when removing head lice, and were also hung in muslin bags near a fire to waft fragrance in a room.

Placed among linen the seeds have acted as an insect repellent in India.

The seeds have been used as a substitute for pepper (*Piper nigrum*) on savoury dishes especially curries, as well as a flavouring for cakes and biscuits. In Greece they are mixed with sesame seeds (*Sesamum indicum*), and in the Middle East (and India) today they are still scattered on freshly baked bread and used as a flavouring for vinegar, pickles and relishes. [In Egypt in the 1950s it was said to be sought after by ladies who wished to acquire and retain the rounded figure believed to be so desirable to their men-folk.] While in France and Italy fennel flower seeds are used as a flavouring in cheese-making. Today the bakery industry in Europe and North America uses the seeds as a flavouring.

Medicinally, herbalists in various countries have recommended use of the seeds for treating jaundice, fever, headaches, intestinal worms and digestive and bowel disorders. Seed oil has also been used to treat skin disorders and scorpion stings.

