

### *Pastinaca sativa*

[Synonyms : *Anethum pastinaca*, *Pastinaca sativa* var. *pratensis*, *Peucedanum pastinaca*, *Peucedanum sativum*]

**PARSNIP** is a biennial or perennial. Native to Asia and Europe it has small greenish-yellow flowers.

It is also known as Birds-nest, Cow-cakes, Cow-flop, Field parsnip, *Gujur* (Hindi), Harts-eye, *Havij* (Persian), Heart's eye, *Jazar* (Arabic), Keggas, Madnep, *Moronen y Moch* (Welsh), *Palsternacka* (Swedish), *Palsternakka* (Finnish), *Panais* (French), *Pànnais sauvage* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Pastinaca* (Italian), *Pastinak* (German), *Pastinako kultiva* (Esperanto), *Pastinák setý* (Czech), *Pônais* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), Queen weed, Tank, and Wild parsnip.

The flowers attract beetles and flies.

Warning – wild parsnip plants can cause dermatitis.

The non-poisonous roots of parsnip can be confused with those of the equally non-poisonous horseradish (*Armoracia rusticana*), American sweet cicely (*Osmorhiza longistylis*), garden radish (*Raphanus sativus*), and turnip (*Brassica rapa*), and also the poisonous roots of monk's-hood (*Aconitum napellus*), of beaver poison (*Cicuta maculata*), of cowbane (*Cicuta virosa*), of fool's parsley (*Aethusa cynapium*), of hemlock water-dropwort (*Oenanthe crocata*), of hemlock (*Conium maculatum*), of pokeweed (*Phytolacca americana*), and of white bryonia (*Bryonia dioica*).

*Sativa* means 'cultivated'.

Archaeologists have found parsnip remains in the excavations of the Swiss Lake dwellings at Robenhausen in the European Alps that date back to about 8000 BC, the beginning of the Middle Stone Age. (They have also been discovered in the south of England, near Glastonbury.) The ancient Greeks enjoyed parsnip, and for the Romans it provided a staple food.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> Century parsnips were cultivated on the Rhine (not today's varieties which have been developed over centuries from selected seed), and according to Pliny (23-79) the Roman natural historian, Tiberius (42 BC-37 AD) who became Roman Emperor in 14 AD arranged for an annual supply to be brought to Rome. The parsnip (that until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was basically in uncultivated form with a tough and wiry root) held sway in Europe until the 11<sup>th</sup> Century when it gave some ground to the carrot (*Daucus carota* var. *sativus*). [This may well have been because the carrot is easier to identify in uncultivated surroundings whereas the parsnip's appearance could easily have been confused with some of its poisonous relatives.] Notwithstanding their then shared pride of place in western European kitchens, especially during Lent, parsnips were ultimately doomed by the arrival of the potato (*Solanum tuberosum*). By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century the latter had ousted the parsnip in several countries. Wild parsnip can still be found growing on the banks of the Rhine where at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century it continues to be a traditional Lenten food eaten with salted fish.

In Ireland the root was used to make a kind of beer, while in the Netherlands it was added to soup – and in some countries it was even made into a kind of marmalade.

Today the modern varieties of parsnip are a familiar Winter cooked root vegetable in many Western kitchens, while commercially a root extract is used to flavour schnapps. Parsnip was introduced to eastern North America by early European settlers in 1609 and it was adopted rapidly by North American Indians. (Authorities believe that it had reached the western side of that Continent centuries earlier from Asia, via the Bering Strait.) If nothing else records show that the local Indian tribes absorbed this root into their medicinal repertoire. Some of the Chippewa used it to treat various female problems, the Paiute took it for tuberculosis, and the Cherokee prescribed it for easing pain. Iroquois Indians included it as a poultice ingredient applied to lumps on the penis and the Potawatomi applied a root poultice to sores or inflammation.

Parsnips were used not only as cattle food but also relied upon for fattening pigs.

In Britain there is a saying that can be traced back to at least 1639

Fine words butter no parsnips

which means that nothing is achieved by 'fine words' alone.

Medicinally, herbalists recommended parsnip (wild parsnip was believed to have greater medicinal value than the cultivated forms) as a male aphrodisiac, a cure for toothache, and a remedy for asthma, tuberculosis, cancer, dysentery, fluid retention, jaundice, swollen testicles and stomach-ache.