

Pimpinella anisum

[Synonyms : *Anisum officinarum*, *Anisum vulgare*]

ANISEED is an erect or prostrate annual. Native from Greece to Egypt it has many small off-white flowers.

It is also known as *Anice* (Italian), *Anijs* (Dutch), *Anis* (Creole, French, German, Russian, Spanish, Swedish), Anise (English, Italian), Anise burnet saxifrage, Anise plant, *Anisi* (Gujarati, Maltese), *Anisoon* (Urdu), *Anisruoho* (Finnish), *Anissamen* (German), *Anizo* (Esperanto), Anny, *Anysun* (Arabic), *Badian* (Hindi), *Bedrník anýz* (Czech), *Bedrovník* (Slovak), *Chombu* (Tamil), Common anise, *Erva-doce* (Portuguese), European anise, Green anise, *Huei-hsiang* (Chinese), *Jintan manis* (Malay), *Kuppi sopu* (Telugu), *Mahaduru* (Singhalese), *Muhuri* (Bengali), Roman fennel, *Saunf* (Indian), *Shetapusapa* (Sanskrit), *Shombu* (Malayalam), *Simiente de anis* (Spanish), *Somp* (Marathi), *Sompu* (Kannada), *Sop* (Oriya), Sweet Alice, Sweet cumin, and *Valaiti saunf* (Hindi, Punjabi).

Warning – the seeds and the toothpastes (that use aniseed as an ingredient) have been known to cause symptoms similar to chapped lips. It is poisonous for pigeons.

Seeds produced commercially can vary in quality according to their variety and source. Spanish anise that happen to be the largest and are otherwise known as Alicante anise have been considered by many to be the best.

The seeds of aniseed have been confused with those of hemlock (*Conium maculatum*) and Japanese star anise (*Illicium anisatum*).

Anisum is an old name for anise (or aniseed).

Cultivated by the ancient Egyptians as long ago as 1500 BC – and then by the ancient Greeks, the Arabs and the Romans aniseed's medicinal and culinary uses have been recognized for hundreds of years. It was probably also one of the at least 36 ingredients used by Mithridates (c.132-63 BC), the 1st Century King of Pontus (northern Turkey), in a poison antidote (known as Antidotum Mithradaticum or Theriac) which he took daily to acquire an overall immunity – an important consideration if it is remembered that he gained his position of power by poisoning his opposition. For the Chinese it was also revered as a sacred plant.

The Romans grew the seed (particularly in Tuscany) and it was one of the most important ingredients in a cake they served after a rich meal to aid digestion. This cake often appeared at the end of a marriage feast too and may well have been the precursor of today's wedding cake in the West. Another sweetmeat that authorities certainly trace to a modern counterpart was the hard aniseed-flavoured lozenge distributed to the people after victories by the Roman general, Quintus Fabius Maximus Cunctator (c. 260-died 203 BC). These *dragati* are put forward as the forerunners of the *dragées* or Jordan almonds (coated with sugar and often aniseed-flavoured) familiar at French baptisms and weddings today. Apart from featuring in Roman sweetmeats aniseed also seems to have been one of the spices used for the payment of taxes (although some authorities dispute the reference to it in the New Testament of the Christian *Bible* and suggest that translations should have referred to dill, *Anethum graveolens*). Today still in India the end of a meal is often signalled when a dish of whole or ground seeds is served – as a digestive aid. While for the Chinese it is one of the 'Five Spices' [the others are star anise

(*Illicium verum*), cinnamon (*Cinnamomum verum*), clove (*Syzygium aromaticum*) and fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare var. dulce*)] familiar in their cooking.

Aniseed's spread throughout Europe could be said to be laid at the door of Charlemagne (747-814), king of the Franks and Christian emperor of the West. In the Middle Ages aniseed was valued as a culinary spice and medicine as well as being an ingredient in aphrodisiacal potions. It was introduced to England in the 14th Century and by the 16th Century (when the seeds were customarily served after dinner) it was a familiar sight growing in English gardens. No doubt this had become fashionable through the Court as King Edward IV (1442-1483) from at least 1480 had his personal linen scented with a mixture which included aniseed. Its popularity in England was to reach such a pitch of desirability at one point that the spice was even able to attract an import tax.

Today in Western kitchens aniseed is used to flavour a wide range of foods including bean dishes, pickles, curries, salads, cakes, biscuits and confectionery. For some aniseed can still be attractive even as an aphrodisiac.

The distinctive aniseed odour is a lure for animals. In drag hunting sacking is often soaked in the oil and used to lay the trail for the hounds to follow. Smearred on mousetraps oil of aniseed is also said to be a perfect lure for mice.

At some point it must have been introduced to North America as records show that some of the Indian tribes there were familiar with it as a source of medicine. While the Delaware Indians viewed the roots as a strong laxative, a plant infusion was a remedy for catarrh in the Cherokee tribe.

Oil extracted from the seeds is used today by the food industry for flavouring baked food particularly and confectionery eg. Flavigny dragees. It is also used by the drinks industry for flavouring teas and in alcoholic drinks, and liqueurs eg. the French drinks *Anisette*, *Pernod* and *Ricard*, the Greek *Ouzo* and *Anesone*, the Turkish *Raki*, the Spanish *Ojen*, the Latvian *Kummel* and the Latin American *Aguardiente*. The oil is also used by the perfumery industry eg. as an ingredient in eau de cologne and by the toiletry industry in toothpastes, mouthwashes, soaps and powders. It is used by the animal food industry too, as well as the cosmetics industry and the pharmaceutical industry (the latter in some proprietary medicines eg. cough syrups and cough drops).

Medicinally, apart from use in easing childbirth and its recognition as an aid to digestion, aniseed can be chosen as flavouring to disguise the taste of medicine.