

Piper nigrum

BLACK PEPPER is a climbing vine. Native to southern India and Sri Lanka it has tiny white flowers.

It is also known as Common pepper, *Filfil* (Arabic), *Gammiris* (Singhalese), *Gol-maricha* (Oriya), Green pepper, *Grönpeppar* (Swedish), *Hat tiêu* (Vietnamese), *Kala mari* (Gujarati), *Kala morich* (Bengali), *Kali mirch* (Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu), *Kare menasu* (Kannada), *Kurumaluka* (Malayalam), *Lada* (Malay, Sundanese), Madagascar pepper, *Malisa* (Filipino/Tagalog), *Maricha* (Javanese), *Maricha ushana* (Sanskrit), *Marichamu* (Telugu), *Marutis* (Kashmiri), *Milagu* (Tamil), *Mire* (Marathi), *Miriyalu* (Telugu), *Mustapippuri* (Finnish), *Nalla-milaku* (Tamil), *Pepe* (Italian), *Pepe nero* (Italian), *Peppar* (Swedish), *Pepper*, *Pepř černý* (Czech), *Pepřovník černý* (Czech), *Pfeffer* (German), *Piepor čierny* (Slovak), *Pimienta* (Spanish), *Piper*, *Pipero nigra* (Esperanto), *Pippuri* (Finnish), *Poivre* (French), *Poivre blanc* (French), *Poivre noir* (French), *Priktai* (Thai), *Schwarzer Pfeffer* (German), *Svartpeppar* (Swedish), *Valkopippuri* (Finnish), *Viherpippuri* (Finnish), *Vine pepper*, *Vitpeppar* (Swedish), *Weisser Pfeffer* (German), and White pepper.

The dried unripe fruit are used:

green pepper – unripe fruit that are pickled to prevent them turning dark;

black pepper – the fruit picked just before they are ripe and then sun dried;

white pepper – the ripe fruit that have been soaked in water to remove the dark skin and then sun dried. (Today most white pepper will have had the outer layer incompletely removed by machinery.)

grey pepper – black and white pepper mixed together.

Warning – peppered foods can cause stomach upsets.

Black pepper can be confused with other immediate relatives (*Piper*), and unrelated allspice (*Pimenta dioica*). When dried, two-celled allspice is dark reddish brown, one-celled black pepper is black and one-celled cubeb (*Piper cubeba*) is grey.

Nigrum means ‘black’.

For centuries before Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) king of Macedonia, invaded northern India in 326 BC pepper was in common use there. Sanskrit records show that it was familiar in India before any other spices. The Aryans (who hailed from central Asia and settled in the Punjab and the upper Ganges region between 2000 and 1000 BC) used this plant medicinally to treat a range of disorders from malaria to wind and piles. It was also used in China as a flavouring and in some parts of Asia it is said to have been viewed as an aphrodisiac. Ancient Egyptians used it during the embalming process. Some authorities claim that it was after Alexander’s campaigns that the spice was introduced to Greece but others suggest the 6th or 5th Centuries BC and this would seem to be leant some support in that it is understood that Hippocrates (c.460-377 or 359 BC), the famous Greek physician, mentions pepper for medicinal not culinary qualities in his works.

It was not actually black pepper with its round seeds that took the Mediterranean by storm (although both it and its white pepper variant were known) but a related species with long seeds and a stronger flavour *Piper longum* or Long pepper. Long pepper was to hold sway until black pepper achieved popularity in Europe in the 12th Century – and then

proceeded to supersede its long seeded relative by the 14th Century and on to present times. Thus most reference to pepper in classical European writings is to long pepper not this species more familiar today *Piper nigrum* (black pepper).

The ancient Romans who used pepper to flavour food from the time it was introduced (usually instead of myrtle berries, *Myrtus communis*) adulterated the spice with juniper berries (*Juniperus communis*). Marcus Gavius Apicius, the 1st Century Roman nobleman and gourmet who is reputed to have compiled a recipe book, not only recommended the use of pepper with sweet dishes but also with insipid-tasting food or in contrast gamey meats (in order to disguise their over powerful taste). However a contemporary of his the Roman natural historian, Pliny the Elder (23-79), is understood to have expressed surprise in his writings at pepper's dramatic acceptance and popularity in the Mediterranean, particularly in view of its price and the fact that its adulteration appeared to continue unchecked. He suggested that its only attribute was pungency and that this quality alone was being purchased with gold or silver. Pepper is also mentioned by the Greek physicians, Dioscorides (1st Century) and Galen (c.130-201).

It is said that it was not until the 6th Century that any Arabs or Europeans ever saw the actual plant from which the spice they prized came as prior to this only the prepared spice was familiar. It reached the Roman Empire from India via the camel trains to Alexandria, and here a duty of 25% of the then price would be exacted before its onward transmission.

The Romans introduced the pepper spices throughout their Empire and the quantities imported (most of which must have been stale by the time it reached the consumer, let alone extremely expensive) far exceeded any culinary or medicinal use. For Europeans as a whole this spice unlike any other became a symbol of power and affluence that can perhaps be best illustrated by examples of its use as currency or political leverage. After the siege of Rome begun in 408 part of the ransom demanded for the City by Alaric I (c.370-410), leader of the Visigoths, from the western Roman Emperor Honorius (384-423) was said to have been in the form of 3000 lb. of pepper berries. Another example is provided in the first known written English references to the importation of pepper to Britain when in the reign of Ethelred II (c.968-1016) documents show that a toll which included 10 lb. of pepper was imposed on shipments destined for Billingsgate at Christmas and Easter. Then towards the end of the Middle Ages in Britain (as well as other parts of Europe) when imported spices were no less expensive than in Roman times it was often the custom to pay a landlord's rent from a shipment of pepper using specified weights of peppercorns. This not only reduced the landlord's own annual costs but also ensured a more stable payment than that represented by the coinage at the time. Through this practice the term 'peppercorn rent' was ultimately established in Britain in the 15th Century representing a significant amount. (Today use of the term implies a nominal or trifling amount.) A current ritual example occurred in the mid-20th Century in November 1973 when Prince Charles (1948-) accepted his feudal rent as Duke of Cornwall. He had crossed the river Tamar and entered the town of Launceston in Cornwall where, at the Castle, he received a pair of gilt spurs, a hunting bow, a salmon spear, two greyhounds, a pair of white gloves, a load of firewood, 100 specially struck coins, a pound of cumin and a pound of peppercorns. A different extant example (as at least 2006) is provided by The University of Bath. Apparently its lease with the Bath and North East Somerset Council offers an option (unused as yet) that could enable the University to pay dues to the Council in the form of peppercorns.

In the Centuries following the fall of Rome pepper was also used for 'productive' gifts, fines and as insurance, in addition to ransom payments, levies or taxes. Some of the instances have been quite imaginative let alone incredible in today's world. In France two Christian bishops (in 1143 and 1283) imposed a 'Christmas tax' on Jews in the Aix-en-Provence

area when they refused to become Christians. If they did not pay the pepper they would lose both their free schools and their own cemeteries. Also in France apparently a slave could obtain his freedom with one pound of peppercorns. In the next two centuries particularly wealthy European households maintained large peppercorn stores not only as insurance against poverty but also as a display of wealth (and a status symbol). It caused an unattributed poet to write

Ils n'ont ne poivre ne moutarde

Ésper bien lor vient, mais molt tarde..

(They have neither pepper nor mustard; I hope they'll get some of course – but much, much later.).

Then in 1527 when Isabella of Portugal married Charles I of Spain and V as Holy Roman Emperor (1500-1558) her brother paid part of her dowry in peppercorns.

In western Europe by the end of the Middle Ages pepper was not only one of the most important seasonings in wealthy kitchens but a valued food preservative as well. In England its culinary importance is further illustrated by the establishment of the Guild of Pepperers, one of the oldest guilds in London. First mention of this body seems to occur in 1180 when historians learn it was found guilty of failing to obtain a royal licence and was duly fined. It is fascinating to note that members of this Guild ('Pepperers') were registered as 'Grossarii' in 1328 – a term that was to form the root of the word 'grocer'. A reminder of the use of both its seasoning and preservative properties in earlier times was dramatically offered in the 1980s. In Britain in 1982 the remains of the warship HMS *Mary Rose* were lifted from the bottom of Portsmouth Harbour where she had sunk in 1545. Amongst the artefacts the archaeologists found were the remains of small bags in which each sailor had carried his supply of peppercorns – the only spice that was able to make rotting or heavily salted meat palatable – and act as a preservative.

It was the high value put on the spice/preservative that acted as one of the catalysts needed to encourage Portugal to look for a sea route to India in order to break the stranglehold of the Venetian/Italian/Arab monopoly of the spice trade. The outcome of Portuguese exploits is described under other spices, such as clove (*Syzygium aromaticum*) or ginger (*Zingiber officinale*).

The price of pepper (by now the preferred black or round pepper) only began to drop in Europe from about 1522. By that time the Chinese were importing far more pepper than the Europeans and Chinese merchants started to get directly involved in what amounted to a pepper exchange in Java (now part of Indonesia) – while the Dutch began to wrest control of the spice trade to the West from the Portuguese. At the same time pepper started to be in greater demand in northern Europe (now to be supplied by the Dutch) instead of the Mediterranean south. It was while these countries were manoeuvring for position that the French decided to try and establish pepper vines elsewhere but she had little success particularly in the West Indies or her islands off Africa.

Pepper stimulates the taste buds and part of the nervous system. East Africans believe that eating the fruit creates a body odour that will repel mosquitoes.

Black pepper is used by the food industry today, not least as a food preservative eg. in sausage meats.

In English literature Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1345-1400) refers to pepper in *Prologue of the Chanounes Yeman*

And in an erthen pot how put is al,

And salt y-put in and also paupere.

It is also mentioned in several of the plays of the famous English bard, William Shakespeare (1564-1616). In *Twelfth Night* Sir Andrew Ague-cheek declares

Here's the challenge; read it: I warrant, there's vinegar and pepper in 't.

And in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* one of the Windsor gentlemen, Ford, says
..... he cannot scape me; 't is impossible he should: he cannot
creep into a halfpenny purse, nor into a pepper-box;

At some point black pepper must have been introduced to North America as records show that the North American Cherokee, Hanaksiala and Haisla tribes all used it to season food.

Cherokee Indians are also said to have prescribed it medicinally as a stimulant.

Medicinally, herbalists have recommended pepper for treating a variety of ailments. Those include constipation, as an aid for digestion and a remedy for indigestion, wind and nausea, for treating vertigo, arthritic problems, diarrhoea, scarlatina and cholera and in gargle form for paralysis of the tongue. Today it can still be used as a remedy for wind and indigestion.