

Prunus dulcis var. *amara*

[Synonyms : *Amygdalus amara*, *Amygdalus communis*, *Amygdalus communis* var. *amara*, *Prunus amygdalus*, *Prunus amygdalus* var. *amara*, *Prunus communis*]

BITTER ALMOND is a deciduous tree. A hybrid from the almond from western Asia it has small rose-coloured at their base shading almost to white flowers.

It is also known as *Almendra amarga* (Spanish), *Amande amère* (French), *Amendoa amarga* (Portuguese), *Bittere amandel* (Dutch), *Bittermandel* (Danish and Spanish), *Karvasmanteli* (Finnish), *Ku wei bian tao* (Chinese), *Lawz murr* (Arabic), *Mandelbittere* (German), and *Mandorla amara* (Italian): and in flower language is said to be a symbol of hope (flowering tree).

Warning – the untreated small dull-red tinged, light green fruit (and the blossom) are poisonous. Its strong bitter taste is caused when the crushed nut is mixed with water or saliva which develops into prussic acid and benzaldehyde. This can be fatal in quite small doses. However as the acid is highly volatile roasting the nuts will dissipate it and destroy the enzyme system that originally reacted with the water to form the acid. The roasted nuts retain the bitter almond flavour and harmless amounts of any remaining acid. Although Oil of Almonds can be extracted from both sweet (*Prunus dulcis* var. *dulcis*) and bitter almonds and both are used in cosmetics only that from sweet almonds can be used directly on the skin.

Dulcis is Latin (sweet, pleasant, delightful). *Amara* is Latin (bitter).

An alleged attribute that was particularly valued by the ancient Greeks and the Romans and was referred to by the Greek historian, Plutarch (c.46-c.120) was that the use of bitter almonds could prevent intoxication. This may well have been one of the factors that led to the custom of eating salted almonds during dinner.

Bitter almond oil can be used as a flavouring on a commercial basis in pharmaceutical preparations. It can also be used in the confectionery, liqueur, cosmetics, perfumery and toiletry industries (the latter in hair conditioners).

Today in the United States bitter almonds are banned and apricot kernels (*Prunus armeniaca*) are sometimes used as an alternative. The many varieties of bitter and sweet almond (*Prunus dulcis* var. *dulcis*) are usually distinguishable by the size and shape of the fruit and their skin (the woody or fibrous nut-like outer covering of the seed). To ascertain whether seeds are bitter or sweet, they are bruised and immersed in water. A white emulsion will form and if this has a pronounced odour the seeds will be those of the bitter almond.