

Prunus dulcis var. *dulcis*

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

ALMOND is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to central and southern Asia (particularly Iran) it has small fragrant, clear pink flowers.

It is also known as *Almendra* (Spanish), *Amande* (French), *Amande commun* (French), *Amandel* (Dutch), *Amandelboompje* (Dutch), *Amandier* (French), *Amendoa doce* (Portuguese), *Badam* (Hindi, Urdu), Common almond, Greek nuts, Jordan almond, *Lewza zghira* (Maltese), *Lōz* (Arabic), *Mandel* (German, Swedish), *Mandelbaum* (German), *Mandl'a obyčajná* (Slovak), *Mandloň obecná* (Czech), *Mandorlo* (Italian), *Manteli* (Finnish), *Soed mandel* (Danish), Sweet almond, *Tian wei bian tao* (Chinese), Tonsil plum, and *Zoete amandel* (Dutch); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of fruitfulness, heedlessness, hope (blossom), indiscretion, perfidy, self-protection, stupidity, thoughtlessness, vigilance, and virginity.

Oil and essence are extracted from the seeds.

Warning – almond oil can cause an allergic reaction on highly sensitive skins.

Sweet almonds are similar in appearance to bitter almonds (*Prunus dulcis* var. *amara*) but the latter are poisonous when unprocessed. To ascertain whether almond 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.

Of the many varieties of sweet almonds the most famous is probably the thick-shelled Jordan almond (the name is a corruption of the French word *jardin*) found around Malaga in southern Spain.

Dulcis is Latin (sweet, pleasant, delightful).

The name Almond refers to the early blossom as it comes from a word meaning 'to hasten or awake early'. (In Syria and Palestine the tree flowers in January.) Both today's name Almond and the early English name *almande* come from the French *amande*. This in turn was derived from a Latin name *amandela* that itself came from the Greek *amygdala*.

Countries in Asia have cultivated the almond for thousands of years but it was only introduced to mainland Europe by the ancient Greeks around 500 BC not long after the establishment of the Persian Empire. At that time the Greeks knew of at least 10 different kinds of almond seed.

On the island of Crete archaeologists have found almonds dating back to the Neolithic period (2700-1900 BC) in excavations under the Palace of Knossos, and storerooms at Hagia Triada have produced Bronze Age (1900-500 BC) remains. Early records that mention almonds include the Hittite chronicles and the *Bible*. In the latter almond is one of only two nuts mentioned the other being pistachio (*Pistacia vera*). The small dull red-tinged, light green fruit of the almond tree were included in the decoration of the golden candlestick in the Jewish tabernacle, and in the Old Testament of the *Bible* Aaron's rod is described as being made of an almond branch. The ancient Egyptians used almond oil (which may have been imported as botanists still debate whether the trees grew there) in cosmetic preparations and mummification, and ground almonds were one of the

thickening agents in Persian cookery for both sweet and savoury dishes. Almond oil was also burnt as incense. Archaeologists found a walking stick made from almond wood in the tomb of the Egyptian boy-king Tut'ankhamun (who died in c.1340 BC).

The almond signifies 'divine approval' in medieval art, an attribute bestowed on the basis of the references to the almond in the Books of Genesis and Numbers in the Old Testament of the *Bible*. Further mention of almond is made in Exodus and with a play on words as its Hebrew name means 'waker' in Jeremiah (Chapter 1, verse 11). It is also an emblem of the Virgin Mary in the Christian tradition.

The ancient Greeks exported almonds to Italy where the Romans knew them as 'Greek nuts'. It is thought however that they did not reach France until the 8th Century (although some authorities contend that the trees have been growing in the south of France since at least the 8th Century BC) – and north-western Europe later still when they were introduced by the Arabs and the Crusaders. (The Moguls brought almonds to India during their invasions at the end of the 15th Century.)

A traditional sauce made from olive oil (*Olea europaea*), saffron (*Crocus sativus*), almonds, garden parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*) and water which is used in Spain today (as Worcestershire sauce is used in other countries), is believed to be of Moorish origin. In the early 1500s the first almond tree came to England but it must have taken about another 50 years before its popularity reached the stage where in Elizabethan recipes Almond water was used as we use milk now. [Almond water was made by soaking the blanched, powdered nuts in water. The resulting milk substitute was popular in north-western Europe until the late 1700s and gained a nutritional reputation enhanced by exclusivity as the expensive nuts were imported from Italy and only accessible to the rich.]

The almond came to be known on the other side of the Atlantic as records show that it provided food for North American Hopi Indians.

Its early Spring flowering led to almond being an emblem of hope. A Greek legend tells how the gods transformed the Thracian princess, Phyllis, into an almond tree symbolizing 'hope' after she died of a broken heart. On her wedding day her fiancé, the Greek prince Demophon, had abandoned her. Initially the tree into which Phyllis was changed did not thrive and by the time Demophon returned it was such a sorry sight as it had no leaves or blossom. However as soon as Demophon saw it he lovingly embraced the unhappy plant and the leaves and blossom sprang forth.

The reddish wood has been used for veneering.

Although Oil of Almonds is extracted from both sweet and bitter almonds and both are used in cosmetics only that from sweet almonds can be used directly on the skin, such as for aromatherapy massage. In pharmaceutical applications this oil is primarily used as a suspension for other medicinal remedies, especially cough mixtures. It is used by the food industry for flavouring pastries and confectionery, and the drinks industry in syrups. It is used in cosmetic and toiletry preparations (particularly soaps, and massage oils) – and it has also been used as a lubricant for watches.

Almond flour (the oil is removed) contains no starch and is therefore used in some dietary foods such as for diabetic .

It is the birthday flower for 8th April.