

*Secale cereale*

[Synonyms : *Secale montanum*, *Secale strictum*, *Secale turkestanicum*, *Triticum cereale*]

**RYE** is a grass. Debatably from eastern Turkey or north-eastern Europe, it has slender bristly spikes of tiny flowers.

It is also known as Cereal rye, Common rye, Cultivated annual rye, Cultivated rye, *Råg* (Swedish), *Raž siata* (Slovak), *Rhyg* (Welsh), *Roggen* (German), *Ruis* (Finnish), *Seigle* (French), *Seigle* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Sekalo cereala* (Esperanto), and *Žito seté* (Czech); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of changeable disposition (leaves).

Warning – rye can be poisonous if taken internally unprocessed.

*Cereale* means ‘of agriculture’ (Ceres was the Roman corn goddess).

Most authorities seem to believe that rye spread gradually northwards through Europe (which would seem to contradict the possibility that it is native to north-eastern Europe) as an unwanted plant amongst the cultivated wheat (*Triticum*). Archaeologists have found some remains in Britain that date back to the Iron Age (about 500-51 BC). Its cultivation as an individual grain progressed northwards through the Continent in the wake of its role as an unsolicited alien, beginning in eastern Europe during the ancient Greek civilization, reaching western Europe in the early years AD, and northern Europe only from about the Middle Ages. Farmers would often find it difficult to prevent separated rye growing on the field edges from swamping the wheat and the fields were then often left mixed and after harvesting a mixed crop was sown. The mixture came to be known as maslin and produced a light brown bread.

For the ancient Greeks and the Romans rye was only suitable for the poor, and this humble station is understood to have been emphasised by the bad reputation it earned from the smell of rye porridge. During the Middle Ages however this same smell was considered by some in western Europe to resemble violets (*Viola odorata*). After that period as western Europe’s standard of living increased rye and its brownish-grey flour became less popular here too, although in Scandinavia and central Europe use of the grain persisted. Today the black breads such as pumpernickel are still popular in some countries such as Germany, and elsewhere they are also reviving a little in popularity as fashion dictates.

There is scant mention of rye in the plays of the famous English dramatist, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) but those that exist include this extract from one of the songs in *As You Like It*.

Between the acres of the rye,  
With a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonino,  
Those pretty country folks would lie,  
In spring time, .....

It is one of the favoured hosts for ergot, the parasitical fungus that wreaked havoc in Europe from at least the 6<sup>th</sup> to the early 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Rye could still be found mixed in with the crop in the wheat-fields during this period and was rarely separated out from the primary grain – and it can still be found in wheat in central Asia today. (Even as recently as 1951 a case of ergot poisoning was recorded in France.)

In the earlier Centuries AD until about 1100 when the communal hotpot hung virtually permanently in northern European kitchens the practice of adding dumplings to the stew gradually developed and during the centuries approaching 1100 these were usually made from rye. In Russia either rye (or barley, *Hordeum*) was used to make a beer known as *kvas* which became a common home brew – and it was also the prime ingredient of the traditional Russian rye bread.

Authorities suspect that rye was first cultivated in North America by the French – and that North American Indian tribes were not over enamoured by this new cereal which for them could not compare with the native maize (*Zea*).

The mature straw has provided thatching material, and bedding, and it has also been used to make paper and straw hats.

Unlike other cereals such as wheat (*Triticum*) or barley (*Hordeum*) official world figures on rye seem to be minimal (which is probably an indication of its lower commercial esteem). It is believed that 40% of the world's rye crop is grown in Russia.

Rye is used today in the West by the food industry for making for example black bread eg. pumpernickel, or crisp-breads, and by the drinks industry for making spirits such as vodka, whisky, or gin, as well as beer. The agricultural industry uses it as food for livestock – and the straw is woven into hats and handbags.