

Sesamum indicum

[Synonyms : *Sesamum africanum*, *Sesamum occidentale*, *Sesamum oleiferum*, *Sesamum orientale*]

SESAME (English, French) is an annual or perennial (viewed by some botanists today as a cultivated variety). From the African and Indian tropics it has small scented, purple to whitish flowers with faintly crimson-speckled throats.

It is also known as *Ajonjoli* (Arabic), Bene, Beniseed, Benne, Benny seeds, *Berik-tel* (Indian), *Bijan lenga* (Malay), Eastern foxglove, *Ella* (Tamil), *Ellu* (Malayalam), Gingelli, Gingelly-oil, Gingili, Gingilly, *Ginggiolena* (Italian), *Goda-tela* (Indian), *Huan* (Burmese), *Jugeoline* (French), *Kalatal* (Gujarati), *Mafuta*, *Mitha tel* (Indian), *Naga* (Thai), *Nallena* (Malay), *Nuvvulu* (Telugu), Oil plant, Oily pulse, *Ollinge* (German), *Seesami* (Finnish), *Sesam* (German, Swedish), *Sésame* (French), *Sesamo* (Italian, Spanish), *Sesamum*, *Simsim* (Arabic), *Sirlag-an* (Turkish), *Sunsin* (Arabic), *Susam* (Turkish), *Tala-tel* (Sinhalese), *Teel*, *Teela-telam* (Sanskrit), *Teel-katal* (Indian), *Telaka telam* (Sanskrit), Thunderbolt plant, *Til* (Bengali, Hindi, Urdu), *Wal-tala* (Sinhalese), *Wijen* (Javanese), *Wowoli* (Creole), and *Yellu-chedi* (Tamil).

Sesame seed paste is known as Tahini. The seeds are pressed to give an odourless edible, sweet-flavoured, light golden-coloured oil (known as Sesame, Gingelly or Benne oil) which has similar properties to olive oil (*Olea europaea*) and is suitable for medicinal and culinary use. Oil is also extracted for industrial use. The flowers are distilled for a toilet water.

Indicum means ‘of or from India or the East Indies or the Far East’.

Some authorities point out that the common name Sesame is believed to be rooted in an ancient Egyptian word for the plant *sesemt*. ‘Open sesame’ declaimed by Aladdin in the legendary *The Thousand and One Nights* is strongly associated with the plant, particularly the fruit capsule which when ripe bursts abruptly with a loud sound in order to disperse its seeds and which, between the seeds and their oil, offers a cornucopia of uses.

Authorities believe it likely that sesame was first brought into cultivation in Africa. Certainly during the last centuries BC oil was being extracted from the seeds there. Some believe that sesame oil may have been employed by the early communities in the Indus Valley on the Indian continent as early as 2000 BC. And it is understood that Egyptologists continue to debate the likelihood of sesame or its oil having made an early appearance in ancient Egypt – and that it was being cultivated there from about 1300-1250 BC. [They argue the possibility that any materials so identified might actually be hemp (*Cannabis sativa*) or flax (*Linum usitatissimum*).] It is contended by some authorities that the second major outburst of Assyrian aggression (around 880 BC which consolidated an Empire that extended from the whole of the eastern Mediterranean eastwards to the Persian Gulf for about 200 years until the fall of the capital of Nineveh in 609 BC) may have contributed significantly to the progression of sesame through the Middle East. Apparently oil was a preferred form of tribute at that time and countries who had relied on the olive tree’s oil yield were forced to cultivate the relatively short-lived sesame for its oil crop in order to make this offering rapidly to their new Assyrian masters.

Archaeologists building a picture of Babylon have identified an entry for sesame oil on clay tablets recording Nebuchadnezzar's (died 562 BC) palace accounts. From there sesame continued its march east and south.

Sesame was imported by China, possibly via Persia, from the time of the Han dynasty (202 BC-220 AD). Here it has been used to make lamp-black for Chinese ink. (They learnt to heat the seeds in order to darken the oil.)

It also spread through India, and on to Burma (now called Myanmar) and other south-eastern Asian countries. In relation to the latter authorities have debated the importance of sesame oil as a cooking medium in areas where ghee (clarified butter, particularly that obtained from buffalo milk) was in short supply – and thus the more rapid acceptance and spread of the plant.

But it was not until many centuries later that it crossed the Atlantic with the Portuguese traders (particularly to Brazil) and the African slaves who introduced it to the Caribbean and southern North America. North American Cherokee Indians absorbed sesame into their medicinal range of drugs. They used it as a purgative and to treat dysentery and some female problems.

Sesame is still cultivated today for the seed oil which has similar properties to olive oil (*Olea europaea*). It is often used in hot climates for cooking instead of olive oil or ghee and it is also used as a salad oil. In the 1960s China, India and Mexico were harvesting nearly 2,000,000 tons of sesame seeds annually. The seeds are also used as a flavouring and decoration for cakes and sweetmeats in the Middle East and Java (now part of Indonesia).

In India oil cake (the seed residue after oil extraction) has successfully provided fodder for cattle.

Today the seeds are used on a commercial scale by the food industry to flavour bread, pastries and confectionery, especially in the East in wholefood products. Seed oil is used to manufacture margarine and it is also used by the pharmaceutical industry and by the perfumery, toiletry and cosmetics industries for making soap, face creams and sun-tan lotions). The agricultural industry uses the oil in insecticides and the oilcake residue left after seed pressings provides cattle fodder.

Medicinally, it has been used in the treatment of dysentery in India where also a mush of the seeds has been applied to wounds. (In other countries the leaves have been used to treat wounds.) It has also been used in the past in remedies for tuberculosis and some venereal diseases.