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Sinapis alba

[Synonyms : *Brassica alba*, *Brassica foliosa*, *Brassica hirta*, *Leucosinapis alba*, *Sinapis dissecta*]

WHITE MUSTARD is an annual. Native to the Mediterranean it has small vanilla-scented, bright yellow flowers.

It is also known as *Aasur* (Kashmiri), *Asuri* (Sanskrit), *Avalu* (Telugu), *Banarsi rai* (Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu), *Cedw Gwyn* (Welsh), Indian mustard, *Kadugu* (Tamil), Kedlock, *Keltasinappi* (Finnish), *Mostrich* (German), *Mostarda* (Italian), *Mostaza* (Spanish), *Mosterdzaad* (Dutch), *Moutarde* (French), *Moutarde blanche* (French), Mustard, *Mustarda* (Maltese), Mustard cress, *Rai* (Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu), *Safed rai* (Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu), *Sarisha* (Bengali), *Sasave* (Kannada), *Senèvé* (French), *Senf* (German), *Valkosinappi* (Finnish), *Vanlig vitsenap* (Swedish), *Vitsenap* (Swedish), *Weisser Senf* (German), and Yellow mustard; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of abundance, fertility, growth, indifference, and 'I smart'.

The flowers are pollinated by bees and flies.

Warning – external application to the skin can cause reddening and must be administered with care. Seed, stubble and fresh plant can be poisonous for some animals.

White mustard has a similar appearance to black mustard (*Brassica nigra*) which is larger, has smooth fruit and is more pungent. Today young seedlings to be grown for salads can often be found on sale mis-labelled 'mustard and cress', 'cress' or 'green salad'. (The true mustard and cress is the seedling stage of field pepperwort, *Lepidium campestre*, or more particularly garden cress, *Lepidium sativum*.)

Alba means 'white'.

The Christian *Bible* compares the growth of a mustard seed to that of the Kingdom of God in Mark Chapter IV.

Centuries ago the plant was familiar in eastern Mediterranean countries and at least as far west as Italy. It came to be grown by individual households for their own use, particularly when the leaves and stems were eaten as a salad or cooked vegetable. This is likely to explain why the Roman Emperor, Diocletian (245-313), defined white mustard as a food not a condiment in his edict 301 and it was still being added to salads in quite a few European countries in the 17th Century.

As a condiment it was the seeds of white mustard not those of the stronger black mustard (*Brassica nigra*) that were first used. In Europe during the Middle Ages this condiment was particularly relied upon to make the interminable salt meat more palatable and the 14th Century saw gradual moves begin towards its cultivation on an ever larger scale than domestic needs would warrant – which must give some confirmation of its importance. The fruit pods were gathered whole in linen bags or the large aprons worn by the women harvesting it. They were then beaten with canes to separate out the seeds and these were formed into balls for sale. Then in the 17th Century progress towards the universal acceptance of mustard as a condiment began in France. Today more than half the world's supply of white mustard seed comes from Dijon in the Burgundy region of France.

Of the several stories about this condiment one in particular centres on Pope Clement VII (1478-1534). He was not only known amongst other things for opposing the divorce of

Henry VIII of England from his first wife Catherine of Aragon (1485-1536) but also because it was he who gave rise to a French expression descriptive of self-important or vain people. This was

Il se prend pour le moutardier du Pape,

(He presumes himself to be the Pope's mustard maker)

and it can still be heard today. Pope Clement VII had a particular penchant for mustard and many schemed to gain his approval by producing an unusual and appetizing recipe with it in the certain knowledge that, if successful, he was unlikely to refuse any favour.

In England it was white mustard's medicinal qualities that took some time to be appreciated, and it was not until 1720 that the London Pharmacopoeia recognized different types of mustard seed. Although black (*Brassica nigra*), brown (*Brassica juncea*) and white mustards have similar medicinal qualities those of white mustard are less powerful and it is usually mixed with black or brown mustard.

At some point white mustard reached the North American Continent. There authorities note that both the Hoh and Quileute Indian tribes ate the cooked plant as a green vegetable and used it as a flavouring.

White mustard offered a new source of medicine for several North American tribes including the Quileute and Hoh Indians. While the Micmac used it in the treatment of tuberculosis, the Cherokee took it as a stimulant, a tonic and to enhance appetite, as well as using it to treat fever, asthma, croup and fluid retention.

Apart from cultivation on a commercial scale for the manufacture of mustard this plant is also grown today as a green manure and as a forage crop for sheep.

Medicinally, herbalists used the seeds for treating poisoning (particularly as an antidote for mushroom poisoning), for curing toothache and for constipation. It was also used in infusion to treat bronchitis and rheumatism, and it provided an ingredient in a recipe for enhancing the voice. Today it can be used externally to ease rheumatic pain and bronchitis.

It is the birthday flower for 18th June.