

Sorghum bicolor

[Synonyms : *Andropogon bicolor*, *Andropogon sorghum*, *Andropogon sorghum* var. *sativus*, *Andropogon sorghum* var. *technicus*, *Andropogon sorghum* var. *vulgaris*, *Andropogon vulgaris*, *Holcus bicolor*, *Holcus caffrorum*, *Holcus cernuus*, *Holcus durra*, *Holcus saccharatus*, *Holcus sorbus*, *Holcus sorghum*, *Holcus sudanensis*, *Milium nigricans*, *Sorghum caffrorum*, *Sorghum cernuum*, *Sorghum caudatum*, *Sorghum coriaceum*, *Sorghum dochna*, *Sorghum durra*, *Sorghum exsertum*, *Sorghum guineense*, *Sorghum japonicum*, *Sorghum nervosum*, *Sorghum nigricans*, *Sorghum saccharatum*, *Sorghum saccharatum* var. *bicolor*, *Sorghum sorghum*, *Sorghum sudanense*, *Sorghum vulgare*, *Sorghum vulgare* var. *bicolor*]

SORGHUM is an annual grass. Probably native to the Sudan it has reddish-tinged, yellowish-green spikelets.

It is also known as African millet, *Amabele* (Zulu), *Baba* (Yoruba), *Bátad* (Telugu), *Besenhirse* (German), Black amber, Broom corn, Broom grass, *Chavela* (Malayalam), Chicken corn, *Cholam* (Tamil), *Čirok obecný* (Czech), *Dao-dhan* (Hindi), *Dari* (Turkish), Darri, *Dirghamala* (Sanskrit), *Durra* (Swedish), *Durrah* (Arabic), Durri, Feterita, Florence whisk, *Graansorghum* (Afrikaans), Grain sorghum, *Grand millet* (French), Great millet, Guinea-corn, *Hirse* (German), Imphee, Indian millet, Italian whisk, *Jagong* (Malay), *Joar* (Bengali, Hindi, Punjabi), *Jonnalu* (Telugu), *Jovaree* (Indian), *Jowar* (Bengali, Hindi, Punjabi), *Kaffernkorn* (German), Kaffir-corn, Kafir, *Kaoliang* (Chinese), *Karal-iringu* (Sinhalese), *Kvastdurra* (Swedish), *Mabele* (Sotho), *Miglio saggina* (Italian), Millet (English, French), Milo (English, Sotho), Milo millet, *Mohrenbartgras* (German), *Mtama* (Swahili), *Muhia* (Kikuyu), *Nami-morokoski* (Japanese), Nigger corn, *Petite mille* (French), *Qarabocc* (Maltese), Shallu, Shatter cane, *Sorgho* (French), Sorghum millet, Sorghum seeds, *Sorgo dukolora* (Esperanto), Sorgrass, Sorgum, Sudan grass, Sugar sorghum, Venetian whisk, *Zura* (Turkish), and *Zúrna* (Sanskrit).

Warning – all parts of this species (especially the leaves) are poisonous to varying degrees according to variety for both humans and some animals.

Bicolor is derived from Latin *bi-* (two) and *-color* (colour) components.

From Indian records it is probable that sorghum was being cultivated in India at least as early as 1900 BC. Here it gained such importance (especially in those areas too dry to support rice, *Oryza*) that botanists recognize that it eventually parented other sorghums in that region. Sorghum has long been cultivated by the Chinese too. According to some authorities it is believed to have appeared there about 3,000 years before rice but first known Chinese reference to it is possibly in a 3rd Century work by H. Zhang. Certainly as in India botanists believe its long domestication in China has led to the emergence of yet more kinds of sorghum there as well.

It was unknown to the ancient Greeks but there is a long-held Christian tradition that the ‘hyssop’ mentioned in John 19:29 (of the New Testament of the *Bible*) as supporting the sponge of vinegar held up to Jesus on the Cross was a stalk of sorghum. Authorities certainly believe it reached Persia (now Iran) only after this period. During Pliny’s lifetime (23-79) when he was writing as a noted Roman natural historian, there is proof

that sorghum was being grown in Italy as a cereal and this continued through to the end of the 15th Century when the practice was abandoned.

After rice (*Oryza*), sorghum (which is more nutritious) has the highest world consumption.

Today it is still a staple food in China and Africa and is especially grown in most of the desert oases for local consumption. In China where it is particularly used in porridges. In some areas including the upper reaches of the Nile the grain was ground by the ancient Egyptians to make bread – and during World War I at the beginning of the 20th Century it was even made into bread successfully in Italy. Sorghum also features as an ingredient in marinades and sauces in Chinese cookery, as well as in an alcoholic drink flavoured with rose petals and known as *caoliang*. The grain has also been roasted for use as a substitute coffee. The traditional sorghum porridge in Tunisia can be bought today from the street sellers there. In the Sudan the women brew a traditional beer made from sorghum stems and okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus*). But the grain's greatest importance must lie primarily in its ability to grow in semi-arid regions providing precious food where other cereals would succumb to drought.

In many countries not least South Africa where its drought resistance is respected, a variety of sorghum (known in this instance as 'Sudan grass') is cultivated for fodder for various livestock (including cattle and poultry). Since 1950 it has also become an important crop again in North America, grown primarily for cattle feed. (It is believed to have been introduced to the southern states of North America first from the west coast of Africa via Jamaica in the 19th Century.)

But the grain is not sorghum's only asset. There are many varieties and some are cultivated for sugar (known as 'imphee') which is extracted from the stems. This is used primarily to make sugar candy. With this end in mind it was grown in a large part of the South in the United States in the mid-19th Century and mills for crushing the stalks dotted the countryside. But the phenomena was short-lived as the convenience of refined granulated sugar from sugar cane (*Saccharum officinarum*) had superseded it by the beginning of the 20th Century. (At the same time between 1880 and 1915 economists have noted that the amount of sugar consumed per head in the United States doubled.)

Locally brushes are still made from the dried flower stems and in North America particularly sorghum is used to manufacture besom-type brooms.

In West Africa sorghum is the source of a red dye applied to leather.

Sorghum features in the national coat of arms of Botswana.