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Spinacia oleracea

[Synonyms : *Spinacea oleracea*]

SPINACH is an annual or biennial. Possibly native to south-western Asia (particularly Iran) it has tiny green flowers.

It is also known as *Aspana-kh* (Persian), *Basook* (Persian), *Binätsch* (German), *Épinard* (French), *Matturbachhali* (Telugu), *Palak* (Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu), *Palang* (Bengali), *Palankya* (Sanskrit), *Pinaatti* (Finnish), *Po tsoi* (Chinese), *Salak* (Arabic), *Spenat* (Swedish), *Špenát setý* (Czech), *Špenát siaty* (Slovak), *Spenót* (Hungarian), *Spinaco legoma* (Esperanto), Spinage, *Spinat* (German), and *Vasaiyilaikkirai* (Tamil).

The leaves of Winter varieties are larger and lighter in colour than Summer varieties.

Warning – spinach may not be recommended for anyone suffering from kidney or liver ailments and it should not be eaten to excess.

Oleracea means ‘vegetable- or cooking herb-like or of the herb-, vegetable or kitchen garden’. The name Spinach is derived ultimately from a Persian (Iranian) name for the plant *aspana-kh*. First known records of spinach may well be those which note that at the beginning of the T’ang Dynasty, the Emperor T’ai Tsung (600-649) received a present of spinach plants from the king of Nepal in 647. Spinach which at that time had not long been introduced to Nepal must have been extremely popular there for it to be sent as tribute and the Chinese are said to have welcomed it with equal enthusiasm. The next relevant known records seem to be those written by the Persian physician and alchemist, Rhazes (c.850-923 or 932) and of the Arabian philosopher and physician, Avicenna (980-1037).

The Arabs who are believed to have found spinach growing in its (possibly) native Persia are thought to have introduced the plant to Europe in about 1100 AD when they were ruling Spain. It is from there that spinach is thought to have spread fairly rapidly to northern Europe where initially it would generally have been found growing in monastery gardens. (There are some authorities who alternatively suggest that Crusaders returning from the Middle East from about the same period may have brought spinach home with them to western Europe.) It is believed that spinach was being grown by French peasants in 13th Century as records indicate that they pedalled it in the towns. It must also have been introduced to Italy rapidly as authorities suggest not only that it was being grown there in 13th Century but that it was also eaten there during Lent (the Christian fasting period) and was often preferred to orach (*Atriplex hortensis*) which could imply an established or near-established practice. In fact one wonders whether the enthusiasm shown for spinach as a Lenten vegetable then was one of the factors that helped to spread it so quickly through western Europe.

Spinach has been eaten in France since the Middle Ages. There called *espinoche* it was sold raw or cooked, chopped and pressed into balls. By the 17th Century it had assumed a fashionable following and was prepared with sugar.

In Britain spinach dishes are said to have been made for Richard II (1367-1400) and some are mentioned in a cookery book published in 1390 when he was still on the English throne. It is believed that spinach was only grown to a limited extent in Britain (in monastery gardens) until around 1568. At that time it is reported that wealthy families were recommended to keep a silver saucepan especially for cooking it.

Although historians are unable to pinpoint when spinach crossed the Atlantic by 1806 there were three varieties of it growing in North America. It was one of the crops cultivated on the Virginian estate of Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), the third President of the United States.

18th and early 19th Century recipes for spinach dishes required the spinach to be blanched and cooked for a much longer period than is considered desirable today. Although it is still generally believed that spinach needs to be cooked, it can often be added raw to gourmet salads now particularly in the United States.

The leaves provide a yellow dye and also an edible, green colouring that has been used in liqueurs.

Medicinally, spinach used to be recommended in the treatment of some respiratory disorders.

Today it is valued in some convalescent diets for its mineral content and in the early 21st Century research scientists in the United States were working on a possible way of restoring partial sight for some forms of blindness with the help of light-absorbing pigments extracted from spinach.