

Trigonella foenum-graecum

[Synonyms : *Trigonella tibetana*]

FENUGREEK is an annual. Native to south-western Asia and southern Europe it has small heavily scented, pea-like, yellowish-white flowers.

It is also known as *Abish* (Ethiopian), *Alforva* (Portuguese), *Alholva* (Spanish), *Asumodhagam* (Sinhalese), Bird's bill, Bird's foot, *Bockhornsklöver* (Swedish), *Bockschorneklee* (German), *Boy tohumu* (Turkish), *Bukkehornkløver* (Norwegian), *Cemen* (Turkish), Channi Rajani of India, Classical fenugreek, *Ervinha alforvas* (Portuguese), *Fenacho* (Portuguese), *Fenegriek* (Dutch), *Feno greco* (Portuguese), *Fenugrec* (French), *Fénugrek* (French), *Fenugreko* (Esperanto), *Fieno greco* (Italian), Foenugreek, *Görögszéna* (Hungarian), Greek clover, Greek hay, Greek hayseed, *Griechisches Bockshorn* (German), *Halba* (Malay), *Halbah* (Arabic), *Helba* (Arabic, Maltese), *Hulbe* (Turkish), *Koroha* (Japanese), *K'u-tou* (Chinese), *Mathai* (Tamil), *Mentulu* (Telugu), *Mêthi* (Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, Sanskrit), *Pazhitnik* (Russian), *Piskavice řecké seno* (Czech), *Sambelilé* (Persian), *Sarviapila* (Finnish), *Sénegrain* (French), *Shembalita* (Persian), *Shimlet* (Arabic), Sicklefruit fenugreek, *Trigonella* (Italian), *Ulu-hal* (Sinhalese), *Uluva-arisi* (Tamil), *Uwatu* (Swahili), *Vendayum* (Tamil), and *Ventayam* (Malayalam).

2,500 these light-brown seeds weigh about 1 ounce.

Essence can be extracted from the seeds.

Warning – fenugreek should not be taken internally during pregnancy.

Foenum-graecum is made up of Latin *faenum* (hay) and *graecum* (a Greek) components.

This is one of the plants that has been cultivated since at least 2000 BC when the Assyrian civilization was at its height. It was used not only like lentils (*Lens culinaris*) in cooking but also for medicinal purposes. It was a source of medicine for the Arabs as well.

Although the ancient Egyptians (who are said by some authorities to have known it since about 3000 BC) used fenugreek for embalming it is known that like the ancient Greeks and the Romans they too employed its medicinal and culinary attributes and also considered fenugreek to be an aphrodisiac. The seeds were roasted to make a coffee, and the sprouting seeds and the leaves were eaten as a vegetable.

In addition the *Foenum-graecum* (which in Latin means 'Greek hay') refers to its agricultural importance as fodder. Today it can still be used as fodder for horses and non dairy cattle. (It would be unsuitable for dairy cattle as the scent of the hay would pass into the milk.)

It was introduced to western Europe by the Benedictine monks and promoted in the 9th Century by Charlemagne (747-814) who was king of the Franks and Christian emperor of the West. In the 16th Century it was growing in England.

One unusual traditional use of fenugreek in North Africa came from the requirement that women should look attractively rounded. In order to put on body weight the women (in the harems especially) had to eat regularly a mixture of fenugreek flour, castor oil (*Ricinus communis*) and superfine sugar.

Most of the seed now imported into Britain comes from India where when the plant is harvested it is flailed to separate out the seeds. In eastern India today the leaves are eaten as a vegetable (as they are in the Middle East – and in Yemen where they are a staple

food), and the seeds are not only an ingredient in curry powder but are also used as a source of a yellow cloth dye. The protein content in these seeds is such that in the Middle East they are boiled and served as a main dish when a vegetarian diet is the rule. (The seeds have also been an ingredient in confectionery to which they transmit a maple-like flavour.) The Arabs roast the seeds to make a kind of 'coffee'. They, the Egyptians and the Ethiopians also use fenugreek today to flavour bread. Today fenugreek is an ingredient in halva (a Middle Eastern confectionery) and in chutneys. It is also used by the food industry to flavour syrups (particularly imitation maple syrup for which it is the main flavouring ingredient) and sauces.

On what is now the Indonesian island of Java the seeds have been used in hair oil and in cosmetics.

Fenugreek is used by the tobacco industry as a flavouring in pipe tobaccos, and by the cosmetics industry.

Nowadays any medicinal qualities of fenugreek tend to be directed more at veterinary as opposed to human medicine in the West. It is used discriminately as fodder, and both cattle and horses can receive it in conditioning powders.

Medicinally, the ancient Egyptians have used the thick paste (made by soaking the seeds in water) not only as a fever preventative but also in diabetic diets. A decoction of seeds has been used to treat stomach and intestinal disorders (including gastric ulcers) and has been included as an ingredient in poultices to heal boils, carbuncles and abscesses. It has also been used for treating gout, anaemia, rickets and convalescents. In China however it is prescribed for treating some forms of cancer and for depression, impotency, and period problems. Latin Americans on the other hand add fenugreek to boiled milk which is given to nursing mothers in order to increase their breast milk.