

Zingiber officinale

[Synonyms : *Amomum zingiber*, *Curcuma longifolia*, *Zingiber aromaticum*, *Zingiber majus*, *Zingiber missionis*, *Zingiber sichuanense*, *Zingiber zingiber*]

GINGER is a perennial. Native to Asia (probably India) it has slightly fragrant greenish-yellow flowers with a purple-streaked lip.

It is also known as *Ada* (Bengali, Oriya), *Adrak* (Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu), *Adu* (Gujarati), African ginger, *Akekaduru* (Twi), *Ale* (Marathi), *Alenadu* (Indian), *Allam* (Telugu), *Ardraka* (Kannada, Sanskrit), *Ardrakam* (Malayalam), Black ginger, Canton ginger, *Chiang* (Chinese), Common ginger, Cooking ginger, *D'umbier obyčajný* (Slovak), Edible ginger, Garden ginger, *Gelang* (Malay), *Gember* (Dutch), *Gengibre* (Portuguese, Spanish), *Gingembre* (French), Gingerroot, *Gingimbre* (West Indian), Green ginger, *Gìng* (Vietnamese), *Halia* (Malay), *Imbir'* (Russian), *Ingefära* (Swedish), *Inguru* (Singhalese), *Ingwer* (German), *Inji* (Malayalam, Tamil), *Inkivääri* (Finnish), *Jae* (Javanese), *Jahe* (Sundanese), *Jenjibre* (Spanish), *Kakaduru* (Twi), *Kan kiang* (Chinese), *Kekeduru* (Twi), *Keung* (Chinese), *Khing* (Thai), *Lúya* (Filipino/Tagalog), *Mutanga-uthi* (Kikuyu), Race ginger, *Shoga* (Turkish), *Shunti* (Kannada), *Sontha* (Indian), Stem ginger, *Zanjabil* (Persian), *Zanjatil* (Arabic), *Zázvor* (Czech), *Zengabil* (Arabic), *Zenzero* (Italian), and *Zingibro oficina* (Esperanto).

The aromatic underground stems (called 'hands' or 'races' because of their palm shape) taste very hot and strong. Flowers are usually rare.

Warning – large doses should be avoided if suffering from any skin ailment.

Officinale means 'of the shop (usually the apothecary's or herbalist's)'. Certain plants used for medicinal purposes, whether of actual or legendary value, were kept readily available and acquired this name.

As ginger is native to tropical south-eastern Asia it is hardly surprising that it has been a relatively widely used culinary flavouring for thousands of years in regional dishes in most parts of China, and throughout India. The Chinese have also used it to flavour tea since at least the time of the Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD). They absorbed it into medicinal practice early on, and Confucius (551-479 BC) the famed Chinese philosopher, mentions it in this capacity. It is interesting that many centuries before the West (as early as 5th Century AD) Chinese sailors had pots of ginger growing on board ship so that it could be included in their diet – an ingredient that would have countered any tendency to develop scurvy.

Both the ancient Greeks and the Romans imported ginger from the East. While the former appear to have used it medicinally (it is often referred to by Dioscorides, the 1st Century Greek physician), culinary applications seem to have predominated for Rome. In fact Rome's demand was so great that although ginger was easily obtained there it fetched an extortionate price. Its cost was further exacerbated by a surreptitious tax placed on it at Alexandria from where it was shipped to the Roman port of Ostia. A 'book' entitled *Of Culinary Matters*, often paraded as one of the world's first cookery books, contains recipes in which ginger features as one of the ingredients. Although many of the dishes are said to have been compiled about three centuries later, the 'book' is popularly attributed to the 1st Century Roman nobleman and gourmet, Marcus Gavius Apicius.

Then saffron was one of the at least 36 ingredients used by Mithridates (c.132-63 BC), the 1st Century King of Pontus (northern Turkey), in a poison antidote (known as Antidotum Mithradaticum or Theriac) which he took daily to acquire an overall immunity – an important consideration if it is remembered that he gained his position of power by poisoning his opposition.

Ginger was being used medicinally in western Europe before the 11th Century, including in Britain (it was referred to in the Anglo-Saxon leech books), and in the 16th Century upon Henry VIII's recommendation that ginger be used to treat plague the English Court acquired a taste for gingerbread men and other pastries with what may have been unseemly alacrity. Without this latter added incentive a widespread recognition of ginger's advantages as a digestive aid and belief in its qualities as an aphrodisiac, as well as its culinary attributes, had been long held by then in Europe generally. Despite its expense ginger was added to everything by the wealthy, and one sought-after so-called 'Chinese' delicacy in the 15th Century was 'Green Ginger in syrup' which was traded by the Arabs who had long been using sugar instead of honey as a preservative.

Some authorities claim that from 1547 the Spaniards had begun to import ginger from Jamaica. (Certainly of all the different types and grades of ginger available today, it is said to be the Jamaican Ginger that is often considered the best for culinary use.) Unlike earlier centuries however France uses far less ginger now although enthusiasm for it seems to have remained constant in the European Low Countries, the Scandinavian countries, Germany and Britain. It is used in many commercially prepared foods and drinks the most obvious of which must be gingerbread, ginger ale and ginger beer.

Its popularity in England in the 16th and 17th Centuries is well illustrated by the references to it in the plays of the celebrated English playwright and poet, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) which are an indication of its familiarity to his audiences. Amongst these are

I have a gammon of bacon, and two razes of ginger, to be delivered as far as
Charing Cross

from *Henry IV*, Part I, and

An I had but one penny in the world, thou shouldst have it to buy
gingerbread.

from *Love's Labour's Lost*.

Medicinally, herbalists in the West have recommended ginger for treating some forms of diarrhoea, as well as for wind and alcoholic gastritis. Today it is used to ease vomiting, and recent studies have shown that it can be effective in preventing the symptoms of motion sickness. Its reputation in Eastern medicine is such that it is an ingredient in about half the prescriptions containing more than one drug. In eastern Africa ginger is used to ease fevers, headaches and colds, and is also employed as a remedy for intestinal worms.