

A Backgrounder on Cumin

Slender and branched, the cumin herbal plant, or *Cuminum cyminum*, is one of the most common spices used during the Middle Ages in Europe. It is native to Upper Egypt but was farmed from the earliest times in Iran, China, India, Arabia, and in the countries around the Mediterranean region. The name cumin is in fact a derivative of the Persian city of Kerman. The native name for Kerman was Kermun, which later became Kumun, and finally cumin, in European languages. Presently, the cumin herbal plant is mostly grown as a commercial spice in Morocco, North America, Egypt, India, Syria, and Chile.

The Herb

The cumin herbal plant is a herbaceous perennial that is a member of the carrot family, Apiaceae. It is a small plant, rarely exceeding a foot in height. Much like fennel, the leaves of the cumin herbal plant are divided into long, narrow segments and deep green in color. During June and July, the cumin herbal plant produces small, rose-colored or white flowers in stalked umbels with only four to six rays. The flowers contain seeds, which make up the herbal properties of cumin.

History

The cumin plant is referred to in the Bible, in the Book of Isaiah and the Gospel of Matthew. It also has a place in the works of such figures in herbal healing as Hippocrates and Dioscorides. Pliny wrote that the ancient Greeks ground the seed of the cumin plant and ingested it medicinally with bread and water or wine.

When smoked, the cumin seeds were said to change the sallowness of the face, inspiring Horace to exclaim, "Exsanguine cuminum!" This was likely the basis for the Greek belief that the plant is associated with the god of love, Eros.

Health Advantages

The herb is usually classified as a stimulant, antispasmodic, and carminative. Earlier herbalists discovered that the cumin plant has superior carminative properties as compared to fennel or caraway, but due to its disagreeable flavor, its use as a carminative is now almost exclusively limited to veterinary practice.

The fruits of the cumin plant contain fatty oil with resin, mucilage and gum, malates, and albuminous material. In addition, the thin film covering the seeds yields much tannin, which accounted for its use as a corrective for the flatulency of languid digestion. In the past, cumin herbal plant was also used to treat colic and dyspeptic headache.

When combined with other drugs, cumin may produce a stimulating liniment for use in treating wounds. It is applied externally in the manner of a plaster and is recommended as treatment for stitches and pains in the side caused by the sluggish congestion of inactive parts.