

Medicinal

Saffron has been used traditionally to treat fever, respiratory diseases, and depression. In children it has been used for respiratory infections, colic and to relieve teething pain.

Constituents

Saffron contains water-soluble pigments called crocins, bitters (eg. picrocrocin), and an essential oil containing safranal. It also contains flavonoids and carotenoids (which give it its colour).

Recent research has compared saffron with antidepressant pharmaceuticals in treatment of depression (Akhondzadeh,2004/2005), and in mild to moderate Alzheimer's disease with the pharmaceutical donepezil (Akhondzadeh,2010).

It has been shown useful in relieving symptoms of premenstrual syndrome.(Agha-Hosseini,2008).

Modern indications are in treatment of depression, fatigue, to support cognitive function, respiratory infections, menstrual disorders, dyspepsia and colic, and because of the high carotenoid content – to support retinal function in the eye.

Contraindications/cautions

Saffron must not be confused with the poisonous meadow saffron (*Colchicum autumnale*).

Saffron has been used as an abortifacient at doses of 10g.

References:

Akhondzadeh, A. et al (2004) *BMC Complementary Alternative Medicine*; 4:12.

Akhondzadeh, A et al. (2005) *J Ethnopharmacology*;97:281

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Agha-Hosseini, M. et al (2008) *British Journal Obstetric Gynaecology*; 115:515

Bown, D. (1995) *Encyclopedia of Herbs and their Uses*. Dorling Kindersley. NSW. Australia.

Chevallier, A. (1996) *The Encyclopedia of Medicinal Plants*. Dorling Kindersley, London.

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SAFFRON

(*Crocus sativus*)

Family Iridaceae

Common name Saffron



Description

Perennial growing to 23cm from a bulb-like corm. Saffron plant has narrow leaves up to 260mm long. In Autumn it produces purple flowers 3.5 – 5cm long, which contain three bright red threadlike stigmas. (Bown, p 268-269; Chevallier, p 194).

Habitat

Native to India, the Balkans, and the eastern Mediterranean, saffron is cultivated in a number of countries in these areas, and in recent years in New Zealand.

Cultivation

Saffron is a hardy little plant which prefers well-drained soil in a warm situation, in full sun. It can be propagated by offsets removed from the parent corm in late Spring. Flowers are picked when open and the pistils removed for drying. It does not store well and should be used within a year of harvesting.

Historical

Saffron has been prized as a spice and colourant for over 4000 years.

Culinary

Saffron spice is widely used to scent rice dishes, milky puddings, breads, and cakes. It is one of the ingredients in the liqueur Chartreuse.

Preparation tip: Saffron strands can be infused in a little warm water or milk until the colour of the liquid (yellow) is even. Add the liquid and strands to the dish you are preparing.

Saffron Rice (Sanmugam, 2002, p12-13)

2 tbsp ghee or oil

5 cardamom pods

5 whole cloves

1 stick cinnamon, broken in half

1 bay leaf

1 medium onion, thinly sliced

1 green finger-length chilli, slit lengthwise

300g basmati rice, washed, soaked for 30mins and drained

500ml water

Pinch saffron strands soaked in 60ml hot milk

1 tsp salt

1. Heat the ghee or oil and fry the cardamom pods, cloves, cinnamon and bay leaf until aromatic. Add the rice and stir-fry for a few seconds until the rice grains are coated with ghee.

2. Transfer to a rice cooker or saucepan and add the remaining ingredients. Stir to mix well.

3. Cook the rice mixture in the rice cooker or saucepan, and, when the rice is cooked, remove the whole spices, fluff up the rice and serve with curry and other accompaniments. Cooking time approx 25 mins.