



Turmeric *Curuma longa*



Family Zingiberaceae

Description A rhizomatous herbaceous tropical perennial plant. An upright plant growing 60 – 100 cm. Leaves are dark green, elongated, petioled, tapering at each end, smooth and often curling slightly along the margins. Each leaf arises on an individual stalk directly from the fleshy rhizome at their base. The leaves surround conical clusters of pale yellow flowers arranged spirally along the cylindrical spike. The tubers are oblong to 8cm and 2.5cm diameter, pointed or tapering at one end. Its outer skin is brownish and can appear scaly due to the remaining rings of previous leaves. Inside the flesh is deep orange-yellow.

Habitat Turmeric is indigenous to and grows wild in the forests of Southeast Asia. It probably originated in India, deriving from the wild species *C. aromatica*. Turmeric is now commercially grown across southern and eastern Asian nations and has been naturalised in all wet tropical regions of the world. India is the major producer of the herb.

Cultivation It is propagated through division of the rhizome, the bulbs are collected during the autumn/winter. It requires a soil with excellent drainage and moist conditions and thrives in the tropics and sub tropics with their hot, moist climate and light soil.

Harvesting and Storage

The rhizomes are usually harvested 7 - 9 months after planting when the lower leaves turn yellow. The rhizomes are boiled for several hours, dried and ground into a deep orange-yellow powder. It is highly susceptible to light, store in a cool, dark place.

Uses The use of turmeric dates back over 3000 years to the ancient Vedic culture of India.

Culinary: It has a distinctly earthy, slightly bitter, slightly hot peppery flavour and a mustardy smell. Although mainly used in its dried powdered form, turmeric can also be used fresh, much like ginger. Fresh leaves of turmeric can be used to wrap and cook food. It is used to impart a rich yellow colour to foods. It is used in canned beverages, dairy products, cakes, popcorn, cereals, cheeses, margarines, mustards and other foods. It is used as a much cheaper replacement for saffron. It is a significant ingredient in most commercial curry powders.

House-hold: The leaf oil and extract can also be used as sunscreens and bio-pesticides. Turmeric makes a poor fabric dye as it is not very lightfast, however, turmeric is commonly used in Indian clothing, such as saris.

Traditional: In many Indian traditional wedding ceremonies, haldi is applied to both, the groom and the bride, not only to make them look good with fresh glowing skins, but to ward off the evil eye. It is considered by the Hindus as a symbol of prosperity and as a cleansing herb for the whole body. Modern Neopagans list it with the quality of fire, and it is used for power and purification rites.

- Medicinal** Turmeric has been used for thousands of years to treat a variety of ailments. A potent natural anti-inflammatory and treatment for arthritis. A natural antiseptic and antibacterial agent, useful in disinfecting cuts and burns and speeds up wound healing. Studies have shown it can prevent the spread of some cancers. It may prevent and slow the progression of alzheimer's disease by removing amyloyd plaque build-up in the brain. A remedy for gastrointestinal discomfort associated with irritable bowel syndrome, and other digestive disorders. It is used to maintain a healthy liver and has anti-oxidant properties. It has been used as an anticoagulant for prevention of strokes and heart attacks. Some traditional healers use it for the treatment of cough, or cooked with milk, to treat asthma.
- Constituents** The active substance of turmeric is curcumin. Turmeric contains up to 5% essential oils and up to 5% curcumin. It is a good source of Vitamin C, Vitamin B6, Magnesium, Iron, Potassium, dietary fibre. It is very low in Cholesterol and Sodium.
- Research** Studies show that turmeric may help treat a number of illnesses, however, it is important to remember that some studies have taken place in test tubes and animals, and the herb may not work as well in humans. Also some studies have used an injectable form of curcumin. Research is still ongoing in many countries including the USA, China, Thailand and Japan. Although showing promising effects in the treatment and prevention of cancers, there is a need for more research to establish the facts.
- Dosage** Turmeric can be taken in powder, drops, tincture or pill form. Turmeric can be used regularly in cooking to maintain and promote health.
- Side effects** All scientific researches have been conducted so far have established the amounts of turmeric found in foods to be safe. Turmeric supplements should not be used by people with gallstones or bile obstruction. It may interfere with medications for blood thinning, stomach ulcers, and diabetes. If intake is extremely high it can cause stomach upset. Pregnant or nursing mothers should seek medical advice before taking curcumin supplements.

References

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