



Ginger

Zingiber officinale

There won't be many people who don't know ginger, those knobbly roots on display at the supermarket or greengrocer. This herb belongs to the Zingiberaceae family and originates from Asia where it has an ancient history as both a medicine and a spice for cooking. Its use was spread via the Silk Road trading routes and became an integral part of culinary and medicinal life through the Middle East and then westward from Greece to Europe. Ginger was mentioned in a 3rd-century Roman cookbook, *De Re Coquinaria*, attributed to the Roman Marcus Gavius Apicius.

The Spanish took ginger to the Americas and the West Indies, where it is now an important part of the economy, as it is in parts of Africa and Australia.

Probably most people know the wonders of ginger for cooking. Who remembers ginger gems, hot from the oven, or enjoy a crisp and crunchy Gingernut? Did you make ginger beer as a child? Ginger is one of the most widely known and used spices in the world. Even in cooking it can help improve your health.



(Image: Ginger-Koanga Institute)

Identification & Cultivation: Can we grow it? Yes... if you have a warm, frost free spot. Ginger is propagated vegetatively – that means you can buy a piece ginger root from the greengrocer and grow it. It likes a good composty soil of a neutral to alkaline pH. If the soil isn't kept moist enough, you won't get plump, juicy rhizomes. From the rhizome, the foliage grows to about 1 metre high and is quite attractive. You could grow it as an indoor plant. The flower spikes grow to about 30cm. The spike has numerous bracts, from which creamy yellow flowers, often speckled, emerge. After about 10 months you can dig up the plant and use the new rhizomes for cooking.

Energetic Character: The character of ginger is pungent, hot and dry.

Constituents: Contains volatile oils (including gingerol and shogaol), resins, phenols, alkaloids, bisabolene, borneol, camphene, choline, cineole, citral, inositol, PABA, phellandrene, sesquiterpenes, zingerone, zingiberene and mucilage; plus vitamins A, B-complex and C; with minerals calcium, phosphorus, iron, sodium, potassium and magnesium.

Therapeutic Actions: Anti-nausea, stimulant, circulatory stimulant, vasodilator, antispasmodic, anti-inflammatory, rubefacient (warms tissue externally) and diaphoretic which means it stimulates perspiration to increase elimination through the skin and can help reduce fevers.



(Image: Ginger - Koanga Institute)

There is good scientific evidence to suggest that ginger can help inhibit prostaglandins, which have an inflammatory effect on the body. It can also help to lower elevated cholesterol levels. Ginger has another action: it is antiplatelet aggregating, which means it helps stop blood platelets being 'sticky', to reduce risk of heart disease and stroke.

⊗ **Caution:** If you have a problem getting your blood to clot, e.g. haemophilia, or if you're on blood thinning medication such as warfarin, it is best to avoid ginger.

Medicinal Uses: It is the rhizome of ginger that is used medicinally. Indications for use are poor circulation and cold extremities, e.g. Raynaud's disease. Fresh ginger stimulates blood flow and may also help with epilepsy, arteriosclerosis, Meniere's disease, arthritis, rheumatism, chest complaints, coughs and colds. Ginger can help most digestive system problems, especially nausea and colic. It can stimulate digestion and aid assimilation so you get better nourishment from food. Use it for nausea, travel and morning sickness. It may help lower blood pressure and help stop coughing.

Use for painful or irregular menstrual periods, but avoid it if you have a tendency to 'flood'.

☸ **In pregnancy, use ginger only in small quantities, as it is also a uterine stimulant.**

Externally, ginger can be used as a compress, or as a bath for feet, hands or the whole body, to help stimulate circulation or for aching joints.

Preparations and Use: Infusion: finely slice fresh ginger, pour boiling water over it, cover and steep for about 10 minutes. A cover will allow the herbs to infuse without the essential oils evaporating with the steam. You can add some lemon or honey to taste for a wonderful warming drink or eat some crystallised ginger, drink some ginger beer – or ginger wine! Useful if you have digestive problems after a meal. Or use powdered ginger in boiling water to drink. Not as nice as the fresh version and the essential oils have gone. You can also use it as a ginger bath or compress.

Dosage: Fresh ginger, up to 3 grams per day; Dried ginger, up to 1 gram per day; Tincture up to 2ml per day.

"...it is of an heating and digesting qualitie, and it is profitable for the stomacke." 1597 - John Gerard (1545-1612), English herbalist.

Culinary uses: Ginger is such a useful herb to add zing to your meals. It is a staple ingredient in many cuisines around the world.

*"Nose, nose, jolly red nose, Who gave thee this jolly red nose?
Nutmegs and ginger, cinnamon and cloves, And they gave me this jolly red nose."
–The Knight of the Burning Pestle, a play by Francis Beaumont, first performed in 1607.*

History & Mystery: Ginger originates from Asia; its Sanskrit name is sringavera, which means horn (antlers) shaped. When it was taken to Greece it was called zingiberis, and from the 1st century it was described in writings. The Old English name for ginger was gingifer, which originates from the French gingembre and the Medieval Latin name, which is ginger. It is interesting to see the development of words as they 'cross borders'.

Because ginger has spread to many parts of the world, there have been many names given to it. Each language has its own name, often derived from the original. You can see this from the following names. Some of these include: African ginger, black ginger, sunthi (another Sanskrit name), East Indian pepper, Jamaica pepper, ingwer (German), zenzero (Italian), gingembre (French), jengibre (Spanish), shoga (Japanese), imbir (Polish), Chiang, jiang (Chinese), luya (Philippines), and many more.

These are the attributes that have been given to ginger: Ruling planet – Mars; Element – fire; Gender – ginger is considered to be masculine energy; Powers – love, money, success and power.

"An I had but one penny in the world, thou shouldst have it to buy gingerbread." – William Shakespeare (1564-1616), from *Love's Labour's Lost*.

This quote of Shakespeare's of gingerbread is referring to crystallised ginger; this is what it was called up until the 16th century. It was brought to Europe by the knights returning after the Crusades, but it was not a treat available to the 'common' people. It became a valued condiment and medicine quite rapidly, and remains so. Ginger biscuits, made into distinctive shapes, such as hearts and men, have endured. The gingerbread cottage/house was created as a treat for children with the publishing of the tale of Hansel and Gretel, written by the Brothers Grimm (and some of their tales are indeed grim!)

"I myself have accomplished nothing of excellence except a remarkable and, to some of my friends, unaccountable expertness in hitting empty ginger ale bottles with small rocks at a distance of thirty paces." – James Grover Thurber, 1894-1961, from the preface of *My Life and Hard Times* (1933)

There is a lot of folklore surrounding this herb; it is a wonderful food and medicine. Use it and enjoy it.

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Thanks to the Koanga Institute for images: www.koanga.org.nz

Advisory Note: This text is given as a general guidance. If any adverse reactions occur or symptoms persist, please contact a qualified medical herbalist or medical doctor immediately.