



Short Communication

Spices Commonly Consumed in West Bengal India - An Appraisal

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Abstract

Spices commonly consumed in West Bengal state, India are appraised in this paper grouped in different plant parts used, e.g. leaf, bark, bulb, rhizome, flower, fruit and seed, and aril. Fruit and seed spices outnumber other categories / sources. Botanical name and family, vernacular names, origin, uses and notes are provided for each species. The most commonly used spices are obtained from *Allium cepa*, *Allium sativum*, *Brassica nigra*, *Capsicum annum*, *Cinnamomum tamala*, *Coriandrum sativum*, *Cuminum cyminum*, *Curcuma longa* and *Zingiber officinale*. Besides use as a spice, the medicinal and other benefits of the relevant plant species are also discussed.

Key words: Curries, India, Ingredients, Spices, West Bengal.

Introduction

Variety is the spice of life, and variety of spices is the real taste of life. Indian subcontinent is a leading producer of different spices, and the kitchens in West Bengal cannot imagine functioning without so many spices. Unlike Australia, Europe and northern America, variety of spices has been used in Indian cooking since thousands of years. The spices not only provide varied taste and flavour of different dishes, they are also medicinally very effective in human systems. West Bengal, one of the eastern states in India, has a unique culture and heritage obviously having a special menu and recipe containing different kinds of spices. In this paper an attempt has been made to give a comprehensive account of the spices which are commonly consumed in West Bengal appended with some relevant other information.

Methods

Plant species providing different spices which are commonly consumed in the state of West Bengal, India are enumerated here in alphabetical order under each group of plant part used. Botanical name and family, vernacular names, origin, uses and relevant notes are provided for each species. The information presented herein is based on observations covering the entire state and literature.

Enumeration

LEAF

Cinnamomum tamala L. (Lauraceae).

Bengali – Tejpata. Hindi – Tejpatta. English – Bay leaf.

Origin – It is native to south-east Asia, some Pacific Island and Australia¹.

Uses – Its dried leaves are used as a common ingredient of Indian cooking. Due to its aroma, the leaves are kept in clothes, and chewed to disguise bad mouth odour.

Notes – It is an evergreen small tree. It is also known as Indian Cassia.

Coriandrum sativum L. (Umbelliferae or Apiaceae).

Bengali – Dhonopata. Hindi – Dhaniapatta. English – Coriander leaf.

Origin – The origin of *C. sativum* is still not clear and no certain information about the wild species exists. Coriander was a common weed spread from southern Europe to southern Russia.

Uses – Fresh green herb (leaves) of coriander is used because of its specific flavor, which is completely different from that of the ripe fruits.

Notes – It is an annual herb, according to the climatic conditions, is cultivated as a summer or winter annual crop.

Mentha piperata L. (Labiatae or Lamiaceae).

Bengali – Pudnapata. Hindi – Pudnapatta. English – Mint.

Origin – It is native of Europe and Asia².

Uses – It is the oldest and most popular flavor of mint flavored confectionery and is often used in tea and for flavouring ice cream, chewing gum and tooth paste.

Notes – It is an herbaceous, perennial and aromatic plant.

Murraya koenigii L. (Rutaceae).

Bengali – Curry-pata. Hindi – Kadipatta. English – Curry leaves.

Origin – The plant is native to India; it is found wild or cultivated almost everywhere in the Indian subcontinent (excluding higher elevations of the Himalayas), though it reaches the inner Terai valleys in Nepal. In the east, its range extends into Myanmar.

Uses – Fresh leaves, dried leaf powder are widely used for flavoring soups, curries, fish and meat dishes, traditional curry powder blends, seasoning and ready to use other food preparations³.

Notes – A small spreading shrub, aromatic, the major constituent responsible for the aroma and flavor has been reported as pinene, sabinene, caryophyllene, cadinol and cadinene⁴.

BARK

Cinnamomum verum Presl. (Lauraceae).

Bengali – Daruchini / Mithakath. Hindi – Dalchini. English – Cinnamon.

Origin – It is native to Sri Lanka.

Uses – It has been found to possess significant anti-allergic, anti-ulcerogenic and antipyretic activities⁵.

Notes – It is a small evergreen tree. Sri Lanka still produces 80-90% of the world's supply of *C. verum*, and it is cultivated on a commercial scale in Seychelles and Madagascar.

BULB

Allium cepa L. (Liliaceae).

Bengali – Piyanj. Hindi – Kanda. English – Onion.

Origin – The majority of this species are native to the northern Hemisphere, mainly in Asia. A few species are native to Africa and central and South America.

Uses – Onions as food stuff are usually served cooked, as a vegetable or part of a savory dish, but can also be eaten raw or used to make pickles or chutneys.

Notes – It is a monocotyledonous, biennial plant, it may also be perennial, triennial. Onion possesses a number of therapeutic properties, such as being a diuretic, decongestant and others and has been used by people in several cultures throughout centuries.

Allium sativum L. (Liliaceae).

Bengali – Rosun. Hindi – Rasoon. English – Garlic.

Origin – Garlic is believed to stem from central Asia, although no wild form is known⁶.

Uses – Garlic is widely used around the world and they have a characteristic pungent, spicy flavor that mellows and sweetens considerably with cooking.

Notes – It is a bulbous plant. Its close relatives include the onion, shallot, leek, chive⁷.

RHIZOME

Curcuma amada Roxb. (Zingiberaceae).

Bengali – Amada. Hindi – Aamhaldee. English – Mangoginger.

Origin – They are native to Southeast Asia, southern China, the Indian subcontinent, New Guinea and northern Australia⁸.

Uses – The fresh and dried rhizomes are used for flavouring curries. Medicinally, the rhizomes are used as a carminative and stomachic.

Notes – Rhizomes of mango-ginger have an aroma of green mango. The rhizomes are very similar to ginger but have a raw mango taste⁹.

Curcuma longa L. (Zingiberaceae).

Bengali – Halud. Hindi – Haldee. English – Turmeric.

Origin – It is believed that turmeric is originated from south or Southeast Asia, from western India¹⁰.

Uses – It is one of the principal ingredients for curry powder. In India turmeric is used as condiment. It is used to flavor and color butter, cheese, margarine, pickles, mustard, liquor, cakes, jellies, fruit dishes, also as a food adjunct in many vegetables, meat and fish preparations.

Notes – It is a perennial plant with root or tubers oblong-palmate and deep orange inside. It can be used as a substitute for saffron.

Zingiber officinale Rosc. (Zingiberaceae).

Bengali – Aada. Hindi – Aadrak. English – Ginger.

Origin – It is native to southeastern Asia.

Uses – The spice has a slightly biting taste and is used, usually dried and ground, to flavor breads, sauces, curry, dishes, confections, pickles and, gingerale. The fresh rhizome, green ginger is used in cooking.

Notes – A perennial plant, aromatic. Its use in India and China has been known from ancient times. It is produced everywhere and picked and dug in autumn and winter.

FLOWER

Syzygium aromaticum L. (Myrtaceae).

Bengali – Labanga. Hindi – Laung. English – Clove.

Origin – A native of Indonesia and Malacca Islands¹¹.

Uses – Cloves have historically been used in Indian cuisine (both north and south Indian). In the north Indian cuisine it is used in almost every sauce or side dish made, mostly ground up along with other species. It tastes good in certain dishes like spice cake¹².

Notes – It is an evergreen herb; the buds have an aromatic odour and a pungent taste. Cloves like to grow in hot tropical climates like the islands of Indonesia.

FRUIT / SEED

Brassica nigra L. (Cruciferae or Brassicaceae).

Bengali – Sorse. Hindi – Sarso. English – Mustard.

Origin – The plant is believed to be native to the southern Mediterranean region of Europe and possibly south Asia where it has been cultivated for thousands of years¹³.

Uses – The seeds are commonly used as a spice in Indian cuisine, for example, in curry, where it is known as rai.

Notes – It is an annual, weedy plant cultivated for its seeds. The seeds have a significant amount of fatty oil.

Capsicum annuum L. (Solanaceae).

Bengali – Lanka. Hindi – Mirchi. English – Chilli.

Origin – It is native to southern North America.

Uses – It is used as a vegetable and spice in cooking. It is also used as a gargle for laryngitis.

Notes – It is an annual herb. Over the years it has been used by alternative medicine preparations as a remedy for a variety of conditions, such as stomach upset, headache, loss of appetite, toothache, malaria and yellow fever.

Coriandrum sativum L. (Umbelliferae or Apiaceae).

Bengali – Dhoney. Hindi – Dhonia. English – Coriander.

Origin – It is probably a native of India.

Uses – The seeds are widely used in curries throughout the state, aromatic – have a unique flavor.

Notes – It is an annual, aromatic herb, and is thoroughly cultivated across the state as well as the country. The spice is exported to the neighbouring countries.

Cuminum cyminum L. (Umbelliferae or Apiaceae).

Bengali – Jeera. Hindi – Jeera. English – Cumin.

Origin – Cumin is native to the region from the eastern Mediterranean to India¹⁴.

Uses – The seed like fruit of this plant used for seasoning, as in curry and chilli powders. It is also used for flavoring pickles, soups, etc.

Notes – It is an annual, aromatic herb, having finely divided leaves and clusters of small white or pink flowers.

Elettaria cardamomum L. (Zingiberaceae).

Bengali – Elach. Hindi – Elaichi. English – Cardamom.

Origin – It is native to India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bhutan; they are recognized by their small seed pods.

Uses – It is used as flavourings and cooking spices in both food and drink, and as a medicine. It is also smoked sometimes.

Notes – It has a strong, with an intensely aromatic, resinous fragrance. Guatemala is the largest producer of cardamom in the world. India is the second producer worldwide.

Nigella sativa L. (Ranunculaceae).

Bengali – Kalojeera. Hindi – Kalajeera. English – Black cumin.

Origin – It is native to south and south west Asia¹⁵.

Uses – Nigella is used as part of the spice mixture paanch phoron (meaning a mixture of five spices) and by itself in many recipes in Bengali cuisine and most recognizably in naan bread.

Notes – An annual herb. Black seed traditionally and successfully used in other countries such as Middle East and Far East for centuries.

Pimpinella anisum L. (Umbelliferae or Apiaceae).

Bengali – Mouri. Hindi – Saumpha, Saunf. English – Anise.

Origin – It is native to eastern Mediterranean region and south-west Asia¹⁶.

Uses – Anise is sweet and aromatic, distinguished by its characteristic flavor. It is taken as a digestive after meals in India.

Notes – Anise is an annual herb, aromatic and it grows best in light, fertile and well-drained soil.

Piper nigrum L. (Piperaceae).

Bengali – Gol-morich. Hindi – Kalimirch. English – Black pepper.

Origin – It is native of India.

Uses – It is used regularly as a food additive such as in human diet and preservative.

Notes – It is a very hardy, perennial, flowering vine, cultivated for its fruit.

Sesamum indicum L. (Pedaliaceae).

Bengali – Til. Hindi – Til. English – Sesame.

Origin – The plant was possibly originated in India or Africa.

Uses – There are many foods with sesame as an ingredient. It is used as raw, powdered and roasted seed in India. It is an excellent salad oil and is used by the Japanese for cooking oil¹⁷.

Notes – It is an annual herb with edible seeds. It is widely cultivated and naturalized in the tropical regions.

Sinapis alba L. (Cruciferae or Brassicaceae).

Bengali – Sada sorse. Hindi – Sada sarso. English – White mustard.

Origin – It is now spread worldwide, although it probably originated in the Mediterranean region¹⁸.

Uses – They can be used for pickling or tasted for use in dishes. It is also used in salads.

Notes – It is an annual plant. It grows on fields and waste areas, on calcareous soil.

Trachyspermum amni L. (Umbelliferae or Apiaceae).

Bengali – Jowan. Hindi – Ajwain. English – Carom.

Origin – It is originated from eastern Mediterranean region (possibly Egypt).

Uses – The strong aroma is enhanced by toasting or frying and goes well with potatoes or fish. It forms almost the heart of North Indian cooking.

Notes – It is an annual, aromatic herb.

Trigonella foenum-graecum L. (Leguminosae / Fabaceae).

Bengali – Methi. Hindi – Methi. English – Fenugreek seed.

Origin – It is indigenous to countries on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean and cultivated in India, Egypt and Morocco.

Uses – Fenugreek seeds have been used for centuries as a culinary spice and their extracts as flavoring, it is commonly eaten in many parts of the world. Medicinally it is used for the treatment of wounds, bronchitis and digestive problem.

Notes – It is an annual herb. Now-a-days, it grows anywhere around the world. Moreover, its popularity refers to the pungent aromatic properties.

ARIL

Myristica fragrans L. (Myristicaceae).

Bengali – Jaiphal, Joyetri. Hindi – Jaiphal, Javithri. English – Nutmeg.

Origin – It is native to Banda Islands in the Moluccas, Indonesia. It is also cultivated on Penang Island in Malaysia¹⁹.

Uses – In Indian cuisine, it is used in many sweet. It may also be used in small quantities in 'garam masala'. Ground nutmeg is also smoked in India²⁰. It is used to add flavour in many soups²¹.

Notes – It is an evergreen, small or medium, dioecious tree, which are propagated both sexually and asexually, the latter being the standard.

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