

## Cloves



Cloves are native to the Molucca archipelago, formerly known as the Spice Islands of Indonesia. It is believed the name 'clove' derived from the French word 'clou', meaning nail – a very apt description indeed! Cloves have been used in Asia since early times, not only for cooking but also for perfumes, medicine, antiseptic and mild anesthetic actions. Chinese courtiers were expected to suck cloves to sweeten their breath when addressing the Emperor.

Arab traders brought cloves to Europe around the 4th century, but the use of cloves did not become widespread there until around the 8th century, when cloves became one of the major spices in European commerce. In the early stage, Muslim sailors and merchants enjoyed this profitable Indian Ocean spice trade, which is mentioned in the famous 'One thousand and one nights', where Sinbad the Sailor is known to have bought and sold cloves. Later, many wars were fought over the exclusive rights to the trade. The Portuguese took control in the late 15th century, they brought large quantities of cloves to Europe and cloves became one of the most valuable spices, along with nutmeg and pepper.

This high commercial value of the spice trade drove the Spanish to seek fortune in the Moluccas. For a short time in the 17th century, they were successful in taking over from the Portuguese. Then came the Dutch who conquered Indonesia, extended clove cultivation to several other islands of the country, burnt down all the clove trees in existence, apart from those that grew on the islands under their control, in order to monopolize the trade. Needless to say, the natives revolted, particularly as it was their tradition to plant a clove tree after the birth of a child; if the tree flourished, this was a good omen, and the child would wear a necklace of cloves as a protection against evil spirits. With great difficulty, the French introduced the clove tree into Mauritius in the year 1770. Subsequently, clove trees were introduced to other countries such as Guiana, Brazil, most of the West Indies, Zanzibar as well as Sri Lanka, Madagascar and India.

Cloves are the immature unopened flower buds of the clove tree. The tree is an evergreen, about 8 to 12 m in height, with large leaves and flowers in numerous groups of terminal clusters. The flower buds are at first of a pale colour, gradually turning light green then pink, when they are ready for harvesting. If left unharvested, the buds develop into small bright crimson flowers. The harvested buds measure 12 to 16 mm long, the 'nail' consists of a long calyx, terminating in four spreading sepals, and four unopened petals that form a small ball in the centre. When dried, the buds turn from pink to a rust-brown colour.

Cloves are used as a spice in cuisines all over the world. They are used either whole or in ground form. Whole cloves are often used to 'stud' hams and pork. A studded onion imparts an elusive character to stocks and soups. Cloves have a particular association with apples and are often added to apple pies and tarts. Ground cloves are used to spice fruit cakes, biscuits and puddings etc. In manufacturing, cloves are used in toothpaste, soaps, cosmetics, perfumes, and cigarettes.

Traditional Chinese physicians used cloves to treat indigestion, diarrhea, hernia, and ringworm, as well as athlete's foot and other fungal infections. India's Ayurvedic healers have used cloves since ancient times to treat respiratory and digestive ailments. Medieval German herbalists used cloves as part of an anti-gout mixture. Early American Eclectic physicians used cloves to treat digestive complaints, they also extracted clove oil for use on the gums to relieve toothache.

Contemporary medicine recommends cloves for digestive complaints and its oil for mouthwash and dental pain. Cloves are said to have a positive effect on stomach ulcers, flatulence, and to stimulate the digestive system. It has powerful local antiseptic and mild anesthetic actions. Clove oil is an active ingredient in several mouthwash products and a number of over-the-counter toothache pain-relief preparations.

During Christmas, it is a tradition in some western countries to make pomanders by studding an orange or an apple with cloves, roll them in powdered spices, decorate them with ribbons and hang them around the house. Pomanders go back to the 15th century when they served as natural air fresheners.

Folklore says that sucking on two whole cloves without chewing or swallowing them helps to curb the desire for alcohol!

