

Spices and their Essential Oils

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Spices are a whole variety of dried plant products that exhibit a pronounced aroma and flavour. Spices are derived from aromatic vegetable substances from which none of the flavouring matter has been removed nor any artificial flavour or colouring matter has been added. Spices are derived from almost every part of one plant or another which falls into the group of aromatic spice plants. For instance, cinnamon and cassia consist of the bark, ginger and turmeric are underground stems, cloves are flower buds, pepper are berries; nutmegs are seeds. Entire fruits such as cardamom, coriander, cumin, fennel, caraway and dill make up some of the most important spices, while the herb spices such as mint, sage, thyme, bay and rosemary consist of the leaf and green shoot of a number of aromatic plants.

The history of spices and man's exploitation of them is a fascinating one and goes back to the era of pyramids. Ancient Egyptians have used spices for making their perfumes and cosmetics. In the days before refrigeration, oriental spices added flavour and piquancy to European food and helped to mask any unpleasant odour in them. Spices became so indispensable that they were regarded as a symbol of political and economic prestige. Nations gambled lives and fortunes away in their explorations. They waged many wars over their possession. Indeed, on account of spices many parts of the world came to be discovered. Spices became a sort of 'currency' of the medieval age and maintained this unique position for a long time afterwards.

Spices are perhaps Sri Lanka's oldest export commodity of a trade which began after the Portuguese landed and made a monopoly of the cinnamon trade. It was the Dutch who really organised the spice trade of ancient Ceylon and brought in many other spices.

The spices available in Sri Lanka can be put into two groups. In the first are those spices which are produced in this country and in the second group are those spices which are important for our food preparations but are imported from abroad.

Group I : Cardamom
Cinnamon
Cloves
Nutmeg
Pepper
Ginger
Turmeric
Capsicum/Chillie
Mustard

Group II : Coriander
Cumin
Fennel
Fenugreek
Garlic

Among the herbs which are commonly used for culinary purposes locally are karapincha, rampe, celery and mint.

Among the first group, cinnamon is the most important spice in this country. We produce over fifty percent of the world's cinnamon of the Ceylon type. This product is far superior in quality and flavour to the Chinese cinnamon or cassia which is produced in the Far East and China. Although India is by far the largest producer of cardamom, the product from Sri Lanka has a ready market mainly in the Middle East and this is expanding gradually. Cardamom is the most expensive spice produced in this country. Of the other spices produced locally only clove bud, pepper and nutmeg are exported in small quantities. Ginger and turmeric are of rather poor quality and are not exported and these and many others are all consumed internally in domestic use and for obtaining spice products.

