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Holiday Spices

Spices help to make the holidays taste and smell wonderful. The distinctive aroma radiating from a batch of my grandmother's lebkuchen or springerle fresh from the oven brings back pleasant memories of past holidays, the only time of the year these flavorful treats were made. Indeed, the holiday season simply would not be the same without certain traditional foods and beverages associated with it. Many of these foods are special because of the use of certain spices or flavorings.

Spices have had a profound influence on our civilization. Their demand in Europe before and during the Renaissance Era led to a lucrative spice trade in which vast fortunes were made. Spice routes carrying the precious cargo developed from their source in the East Indies to Europe. When these routes faltered because of political problems, the need to satiate the palate of the spice-starved aristocracy of Europe prompted early explorers such as Columbus, Da Gamma, Diaz, and Magellan to seek a shorter route to the spice-laden Indies by sailing west. Thus, the "new world" was discovered.

A debate, at times, arises concerning the difference between a spice and an herb. Indeed, the two terms are commonly interchanged in English usage. However, spices most often are derived from dried or processed plant parts which (often) are woody in nature and tropical in habitat. Spices usually are quite strong in flavor and used in relatively small quantities. On the other hand, the word "herb" most often refers to an herbaceous (non-woody) plant with pungent tissue whose leaves, stems or seeds are used for their aromatic, culinary

or medicinal properties. Herb flavors usually are milder than those of spices and often best when used fresh, although most herbs dry quite readily.

A few plants fit into the "flavoring" category. These are plants that have an essential oil that is extracted from it and used to flavor dishes or beverages. Vanilla is an example of a flavoring derived from the seed pod of *Vanilla planifolia*, an orchid native to Mexico whereas peppermint is a flavoring distilled from the leaves of *Mentha x piperita*, a hybrid of two species of mint native to Europe.

Cinnamon



Cinnamon. Image source: pixabay

Probably the oldest and most sought after spice throughout history is cinnamon—a key ingredient in many holiday treats. True cinnamon comes from the bark of a small, bushy tree (*Cinnamomum verum*) and is native to Sri Lanka and India. The use of cinnamon can be traced back 7000 years. The ancient Egyptians used cinnamon in embalming their dead and in sacred

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ceremonies. It still is a common component of incense used in churches in various parts of the world. Cinnamon was widely used in medieval Europe in food preparation. Most meals were prepared in a single cauldron containing several different ingredients and cinnamon helped to bridge the flavor gaps between them.

The Dutch invaded Sri Lanka in the 17th Century and established a system of cinnamon cultivation that exists today. The dryer, inner-bark of the cinnamon tree is the source of the spice. After the branches are cut, the bark is scraped and the inner-bark removed in long sections. As it dries it tends to curl into small sticks. Bark that does not curl properly is ground and marketed as ground cinnamon.

Nutmeg



Nutmeg. Image source: wikipedia

Nutmeg is synonymous with egg nog and other holiday fare. It comes from the seed of *Myristica fragrans* a tropical, evergreen tree native to the Moluccas, also known as the Spice Islands of Indonesia. The Portugese (and later the Dutch) invaded these islands and went to great measures to prevent living plants or viable seeds of nutmeg from being exported from these islands in order to maintain a monopoly on this precious spice. Legend has it that a Frenchman by the name of Pierre Poivre smuggled nutmeg and clove seeds from the Moluccas to the island of Mauritius off the west coast of Africa. From there nutmeg was taken to the West Indies where commercial production now takes place. Grenada often is referred to as the “Nutmeg Island” and its flag depicts the green, red and yellow colors of the plant as well as its image in one corner.

Myristica fragrans actually produces two important spices. Nutmeg is derived from the tree’s actual seed which is egg-shaped and weighs about one-third of an ounce when dried. The dried lacy covering of the seed (the arillus) is the source of mace. Since there is about 100 times more nutmeg than mace in a single seed, the latter usually is more expensive. Nutmeg is considered the sweeter of the two but mace has more delicate flavor. Nutmeg has long been considered to contain mystical powers and was used as an amulet to protect against a wide variety of evils and dangers in ancient times. Connecticut is known unofficially as “The Nutmeg State” reportedly because of the practice of shrewd Yankee traders carving imitation nutmegs out of ordinary wood and selling them to unsuspecting customers. An interesting early use of nutmeg was tucking a seed under one’s left armpit before attending a social gathering as a way of attracting admirers.

Clove

Another popular holiday spice is clove which is the dried flower bud of two species of trees (*Eugenia aromaticum* and *E. caryophyllata*). Vasco da Gama found clove trees growing on the Spice Islands although the trees are native to Malaysia. The word “clove” comes the Latin *clavis* which means nail and is descriptive of its shape. A clove is comprised of a long calyx which ends with four spreading sepals and four rudimentary petals that form a ball in the center of the sepals. The buds are bright red but develop a reddish-brown color when dried. When the buds are allowed to blossom on the tree they produce a brilliant red flower.

The Chinese used cloves over 6000 years ago and their literature records the suggestion that courtiers should keep a clove in their mouth when addressing the emperor to keep from offending him. Cloves and nutmeg were among 16th and 17th century Europe’s most precious commodities and were more than worth their weight in gold. Magellan’s ill-fated trip around the world that began in 1519 with five ships and 250 men and ended in 1522 with one ship and 18 men still was considered a financial success because of the 50 tons of cloves and nutmeg the surviving ship carried. Because cloves were thought to kill intestinal parasites and have broad antimicrobial activity, over the centuries they have been used to treat ailments ranging from indigestion and nausea to athlete’s foot and gout. Yet today, clove oil can be found in a number of health-related products ranging from mouthwash to tooth ache remedies.



Clove. Image source: wikimedia

Ginger



Ginger. Image source: pixabay

Ginger is an important component of pumpkin pie and gingerbread, and other holiday staples. As with many other spices, ginger originally was a product of India and southeast Asia. It is derived from a tropical, reed-like perennial plant (*Zingiber officinale*) with colorful flowers.

Often referred to as “ginger root”, ginger actually comes from the thickened underground stem or rhizome of the plant. Ginger was used by ancient Chinese for its medicinal properties. Introduced by Arab caravans, it was one of the first spices to arrive in Europe and became so popular that it was included along with salt and pepper at nearly every table setting. It was used to combat the plague in Medieval times and was kept in dried, ground form at pubs and inns for patrons to sprinkle into their beer and stir with a hot poker. Thus ginger ale was invented.

Anise Oil

Anise oil, with its licorice-like aroma, was the main flavoring in my grandmother’s springerle. It is derived from the seeds of *Pimpinella anisum*, a flowering annual native to the eastern Mediterranean region and Southwest Asia. It has been cultivated for over 4000 years and was used as an herbal remedy for a number of ailments, including stomach problems. Ancient Romans served anise in a spiced cake at the end of a feast to aid with digestion. It also was used to treat respiratory problems because of its expectorant properties. Over the years, it found its way into the cuisine of many different countries including Great Britain (anise balls), Australia (humbugs), New Zealand (anise wheels), Italy (pizzelle), Germany (pfeffernüsse and springerle), the Netherlands (muisjes) and Mexico (champurrado).



Anise. Image Source: wikimedia

Allspice

Allspice is spice associated with fruit cake, cookies and other holiday cuisine and derives its name from the fact it has the aroma of a combination of spices including cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves and ginger. Allspice is derived from the dried, unripened fruit of a tropical, evergreen tree indigenous to Central and South America that bears the scientific name of *Pimenta dioica*, which is a misnomer. The latter most likely resulted from the fact that early Spanish explorers mistook the berries of allspice for black pepper, which the Spanish called pimiento. Still today, oil pressed from the berries often is called “pimento oil”. Allspice is the only spice native to the Western Hemisphere.

Ancient Mayans used allspice in embalming procedures and other natives were said to have used it to flavor chocolate and as a digestive aid. Later it was used to preserve meats or to mask the ill-flavor of tainted meats. Allspice-preserved meat was called boucan. The latter is the origin of the word “buccaneers” which described European sailors who relied on this staple. In spite of its rich aroma imitating other precious spices, allspice never enjoyed the same popularity in Europe as did other spices except for in England where it often was referred to as “English spice”. An interesting use of allspice occurred during the Napoleonic war of 1812 when Russian soldiers sprinkled it in their shoes to keep their feet warm. The resultant and coincidental improvement in hygiene also prompted allspice to be used in the cosmetic industry where it still is associated with men’s toiletries.



Allspice. Image source: pixabay

So, this holiday season when you dip into the eggnog or indulge in a Christmas cookie or two, remember the spices and flavorings that make these treats so delectable. They have had a profound influence on our civilization for thousands of years and still add pleasure and interest to our lives.

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Essential Tools for Pruning Fruit Trees

*Fruit trees are pruned annually during the dormant period before trees begin to grow in the spring. Like any project, having the right tools always makes the job faster and easier. Most fruit trees can be pruned with **hand shears, loppers, and a pruning saw**, except for very large trees on non-dwarfing rootstocks. Choosing sharp high quality tools also helps minimize body fatigue.*

Hand shears are generally used to prune branches smaller than one inch in diameter. Two types of hand pruners can be purchased. The best type is the bypass or **scissor shears**. The curved blades on these shears enable the pruner to make precise cuts on limbs with narrow crotch angles or other tight places on the tree trunk. Expect to pay \$50 for good pair of shears. These have bright red handles that make them easy to locate if misplaced. Replacement blades can be purchased for the better brands should the blades become damaged. Anvil shears are another type of hand pruners, but are not recommended. The straight blades of these shears tend to crush the plant tissues but they can cut through larger diameter limbs than bypass pruners.

Bypass loppers are generally used to prune up to two and a half inch-diameter branches. Long handles increase the leverage that can be exerted to make a pruning cut. However, long handles are also heavier than short ones and increase forearm fatigue. Handles may be a fixed length or telescoping and are often constructed from wood, steel, aluminum, or fiberglass. Wood handles are durable but are usually heavier than other types. Bumper cups located on the handles positioned near the blades are also important in absorbing shock as the blades close and reduce injury to elbows when loppers are used continuously for several hours. A good pair of loppers usually ranges from \$60 to \$130.

Pole pruners are useful when removing limbs that are less than one and three quarters inch in diameter and are beyond one's reach. A standard pole pruner is usually equipped with bypass blades, a saw blade, a pulley with a rope attached to a

six foot pole, and two additional sectional poles (each six foot-long). Handles on these pruners are constructed from wood or fiberglass. Good pole pruners will generally cost around \$200.

Many types of **pruning saws** are available. Saws used for tree pruning cut wood most efficiently on the pull stroke whereas those used for carpentry cut easily on the push stroke. Pull cutters tend to be safer with better control than push types. Good pruning saws generally have a curved blade with seven to eight teeth per inch. The kerf describes the angle of the teeth on the blade. A small kerf and more teeth per inch usually make the smoothest cut. Saws with slightly curved, folding blades (usually about seven inches-long) are handy to carry and the blade is protected from damage when folded. Saws with non-folding curved blades (13 inches-long) can be used for pruning for large diameter limbs. These types of saws usually cost about \$30 and replacement blades are also available for high quality saws.

Pruning tools may seem expensive when purchased for the first time. However, pruning helps develop a strong tree structure, enhances flowering and fruiting when limbs become shaded by others, and limits the spread of overwintering diseases and pests when infected or infested wood is removed. Thus, the expense of purchasing good pruning equipment that will last a life-time is well worth the investment.

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December Gardening Calendar

Category	Week				Activity
	1	2	3	4	
Houseplants	x	x	x	x	Water houseplants with tepid water. Cold tap water may shock plants.
	x	x	x	x	Be sure newly purchased indoor plants are well protected for the trip home. Exposure to icy temperatures for even a few moments may cause injury.
	x	x	x	x	Overwintering geraniums like bright light and cool temperatures. Keep soils on the dry side.
	x	x	x	x	On cold nights, move houseplants back from icy windows to prevent chilling injury.
		x	x	x	Holiday poinsettia plants do best with sun for at least half the day and night temperatures in the 50's or 60's. Keep plants away from drafts, registers and radiators and let the soil should dry only slightly between thorough waterings. Be sure to punch holes in decorative foil wraps to prevent soggy soil conditions.
	x	x	x	x	Hairspray works well to keep seed heads and dried flowers intact on wreaths and arrangements.
	x	x	x	x	If you plan to have a live Christmas tree, dig the planting hole before the ground freezes. Mulch and cover the backfill soil and the planting hole to keep them dry and unfrozen. When you get the tree, store it outdoors in a cool, shady, windless area until the last minute and mulch the roots to prevent cold injury. Don't allow the tree's roots to become dry and spray the needles with an anti-transpirant to reduce moisture loss. Set the tree up in your coolest room. Don't keep the tree indoors for more than one week and plant outdoors promptly.
	x	x	x	x	Be sure the root zones of azaleas and rhododendrons are thoroughly mulched. Any organic material will do, but mulches made from oak leaves, shredded oak bark, or pine needles are preferred.
	x	x	x		Christmas trees hold needles longer if you make a clean, fresh cut at the base and always keep the trunk standing in water.
	x	x	x		Only female holly trees bear the colorful berries. There must be a male tree growing nearby for pollination, if fruits are desired.
	x	x	x		Hollies may be trimmed now and the prunings used in holiday decorations.
Miscellaneous	x				Apply mulches to bulbs, perennials and other small plants once the ground freezes.
	x				All power equipment should be winterized before storage. Change the oil and lubricate moving parts. Either drain fuel systems or mix a gas stabilizing additive into the tank.
	x				Clean and oil all garden hand tools before storing for winter.
	x				If you feed rabbits corn or alfalfa, they may leave fruit tree bark unharmed.