



AYURVEDA ELEMENTS

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The Spice is Right

by Caroline Robertson

Need to spice up your life? Bored with the same old tastes and aromas? Spices not only add a distinctive flavour to food they also have impressive health benefits. So instead of popping pills when you feel unwell first consider how you can use food as you medicine. If you've got the runs, try nutmeg. Nausea? Chew on ginger. Feeling bloated? Favour fennel tea. To savour the variety of medicinal spices available create your own kitchen pharmacy with the following essential spice elixirs.

Asafoetida

Asafoetida's one of those rare foods that smell weird but taste great. Sulphurous compounds in this resin give it a distinctive garlicky aroma. Also known as hing, this yellow resin is most commonly sold as a powder generally mixed with turmeric and wheat.

I think of it as the "great bloat banisher" due to its unprecedented power to absorb gas from the body, flush out fluid and neutralise gaseous foods in cooking. For milenia India mothers have massaged their baby's colicky tummys with 1/5 tsp roasted asafoetida and 2 Tbs warm sesame oil, delighted when the pain and crying rapidly dissipates. Asafoetida's also effective for painful periods, asthma and arthritis. For this its taken as a mixture of equal parts cumin seeds, ginger powder, black cumin seeds, ajwan seeds and rock salt. Try 1 tsp twice daily before meals with warm water or more frequently with persistent pain.

The easiest way to cook with asafoetida is to throw a pinch of powder in with your beans, nuts, vegies or grains. This will not only add a rich oniony flavour but quietens any uncomfortable after-dinner rumblings.

Cardamom

A sweet seed often added to desserts cardamom gives one a sweet breath and voice.

Called the grain of paradise, cardamom was once one of the most valued exports of South India. It is not only delicious but bears medicinal properties that make it indispensable to any kitchen dispensary. Added to sweet curries, desserts, dals and curries it will help to clear the passageways of mucus and to reduce gassy indigestion. Given with ginger it is credited with stimulating the appetite and reducing nausea. Recent research also indicates that it may aid the body to detoxify from caffeine and codeine. Used in cooking you can bruise a green pod, fry it and add to savouries or for sweets add the powder, seeds or raw crushed pods. To help strengthen the respiratory system and eliminate coughs and colds try this traditional chai tea.

To 4 cups of boiling water add 5 bruised cardamom pods, 2 cinnamon sticks, 2 peppercorns, 6 slices of ginger root and 2 basil leaves. Boil down to 2 cups. Cool and serve with honey or palm sugar. This is also a tasty and therapeutic alternative to caffeinated drinks.

Cinnamon

A spice used extensively in Ayurvedic and Chinese medicine, cinnamon is the perfect ingredient to add to your warming winter dishes. The Egyptians used cinnamon as a preservative for embalming and the Portuguese valued its tangy taste so much it inspired several expeditions. Cinnamon is a suitable companion to cardamom in sweet dishes or drinks. The sourness of stewed fruit is disguised by the addition of cinnamon and cardamom. By itself however you can't beat cinnamon sticks or powder to charge the circulation and warm backache related to chilled kidneys. You can apply it by making a cup of boiled water with 1 cinnamon quill or 1/2 tsp cinnamon powder steeped in it for 5 minutes. A few drops of clove and cinnamon essential oils are effective painkillers when applied directly to toothache. Also used to settle hiccups try a pinch of cinnamon and 1/4 cup of apple cider vinegar to ease the discomfort.

Cloves

There's a belief in India that "a clove a day keeps a sore throat at bay." In fact cloves' antiseptic properties are what led to the old English tradition of hanging oranges studded with cloves in cupboards. The ideal clove is black with a thick stem and a closed bud which stimulates the tastebuds with its spicy pungency. Clove buds are often cooked with rice dishes whereas the powder is better in vegetable dishes. For sore throats and coughs one can take a pinch of clove with 1 tsp of honey three times a day or inhale the steam of 7 cloves in 5 cups of boiled water. Chinese courtiers chewed the cloves to freshen their breath and in ayurveda its stimulating qualities are used for low blood pressure and low libido.

Also a popular remedy for worms and amoebas used by naturopaths is a combination of cloves, black walnut hulls and wormwood.

Coriander

Next time you feel hot and bothered sprinkle some cooling coriander leaves on your stirfry or add to your juice. The seeds are also great for the first stages of conjunctivitis and urinary tract infections. Use as an eyewash for eye redness and drink the diuretic tea for the urinary tract. For the vast number of people suffering from allergies such as hayfever a daily intake of coriander leaves can often reduce symptoms. This is attributed to the leaves natural antihistamine, vitamin C and bioflavonoid content which fortifies hyper-reactive mucous membranes. The high bioflavonoid content can also aid haemorrhoids, varicose veins and spider veins. For cooking, the best powder is made fresh by grinding whole seeds, lightly frying and adding to dishes. Fresh leaves can be stored by cutting off roots, draining moisture away and keeping in a sealed plastic bag in the fridge.

Cumin

Cum-an' get it! Perhaps the most popular spice in Ayurvedic cooking, cumin has a rich flavour along with a wealth of medicinal properties. Have you ever had a mix of spices offered to you after an Indian meal? These spices, including cumin, are to help your digestion and freshen your breath. To make your own mix at home combine the following- 1 tsp cumin seeds, 1 tsp fennel seeds, 1/4 tsp ground ginger, 1/2 tsp rock sugar and a pinch of rock salt. Munch on about 1/2 tsp after a meal to ensure healthy digestion. Adding ground and roasted cumin or roasted cumin seeds to dishes and drinks is the easy way to access its healing powers. Both the black and brown cumin help to relieve gas, period pain and diarrhoea. Taken with fennel its a popular tea in India to increase breast milk in nursing mothers. A tea made from the seeds is also a safe drink to give to colicky children. For kids under six add 1/2 tsp brown cumin seeds to 2 cups of boiling water. Simmer uncovered until reduced to 1 cup of water. Strain and cool to lukewarm temperature. Give 20 mls of this warm to the child every hour until pain subsides. To disguise the taste it can be mixed with peppermint tea or diluted buttermilk.

Curry leaves

To make a good Indian dish *great*- just add fresh curry leaves. The leaves must be fresh though as once dried they become relatively bland. The good news is that curry trees are one of the easiest and hardiest plants to grow. Curry leaves are added either fresh or lightly fried in oil to dishes generally towards the conclusion of cooking. They are then either taken out or left in, depending on the diners preference.

Curry leaves are traditionally used to soothe stomach upsets. They are most effective in cooling the burning pain of ulcers and skin conditions. Diarrhoea and dysentery is also treated with curry leaves in Ayurvedic medicine. They are often thrown into dals and chutneys to combat gas and worms. To keep curry leaves fresh for months keep them on the stalk and store in an air-filled plastic bag in the freezer.

Fenugreek

People tend to avoid this wonderful spice because of its bitter taste. But the secret to reduce its bitterness is to dry roast fenugreek seeds thereby rendering it more palatable. Why bother using fenugreek at all? The ancient Greeks, Egyptians, Chinese and Indians highly prized this spice for its ability to increase breast milk, ease childbirth, reduce period pain and stomach cramps. Modern science has also confirmed its efficacy as a hypoglycaemic agent for late onset diabetes. For stubborn pimples, boils or cellulitis make a poultice of the powdered seeds and apply the warm paste to the affected area for 20 minutes. The Chinese recommended 1/2 tsp seeds daily to maintain a healthy female reproductive system. Its mucilagenous and lymphatic properties are also good for lymphatic conditions and lung problems such as smokers cough. This can be taken as a tea by adding 1 tsp of seeds to 2 cups of boiling water. Boil down to one cup, strain and drink up to three cups a day. Fenugreek is a spice that should be avoided during pregnancy as it can promote uterine contractions.

Ginger

Known in India as "Vishwabeshaj" or the universal medicine, ginger is an irreplaceable addition to your spice apothecary. Recent medical trials has supported its traditional prescription for morning and motion sickness. Try chewing on a slice of fresh ginger or enjoy a cup of ginger tea to alleviate these conditions. An addition to about 80% of Chinese and Ayurvedic medicines, ginger has a long history as a remedy for poor circulation, coughs, colds, flu, nausea and poor digestion. To improve circulation in winter try a morning cup of ginger root, cinnamon quill and pepper tea. Combine 5 slices of fresh ginger, 1 cinnamon stick and 2 peppercorns in 1 cup of boiling water. Reduce to one cup, strain and add honey to taste before drinking. It can keep you warm all day. To soothe lower backache, sciatica and kidney pain, a poultice can be applied in the early phase of the condition. When selecting ginger root choose the knob with smooth skin, hard, no green colour or mould in the crevices. The resin of the skin can upset the stomach so peel this off before adding the grated, diced or thinly sliced root to dishes. Dry ginger is stronger than fresh ginger so use it sparingly.

Nutmeg

Nutmeg's very unique flavour indicates its very distinctive medicinal qualities. This aromatic nut is famous in Indian households for curing diarrhoea and malabsorption. Nutmegs effectiveness for this has also been applied successfully in modern clinical trials with sufferers of Crohns disease. This is one of the best remedies for morning diarrhoea, an indication that the digestive energy is very weak. For this take 1/4 tsp ground nutmeg with 1 tsp cumin seeds and 3 curry leaves cooked with boiled soupy rice for breakfast- yum! Or just mix a pinch with your breakfast cereal. Nutmeg's dubious reputation in the past was due to its hallucinogenic action when taken in large quantities- people taking it reported a feeling of being "deliriously inebriated." In fact nutmeg does have mind-altering properties and therefore should only be taken in small quantities. For insomnia or restless sleep try taking 1/4 tsp freshly grated nutmeg and adding it to 1/2 cup of warm milk . This can really help to calm the mind and induce a sound sleep. Nutmeg essential oil has also been used as a clove substitute for toothache when applied directly to the painful region. Mixed with a base of sesame or almond oil it can be used as a massage oil for arthritis and combined with clary sage for delayed labour.

Saffron

To woo your woman feed her a sweet dessert or drink laced with the aphrodisiac threads of saffron. Saffron is a fabulous female reproductive tonic that not only boosts libido but increases milk flow, reduces period pain and boosts fertility. As such it shouldn't be taken during pregnancy but is great post-natally. Since pure saffron is very expensive it is generally adulterated with Calendula or Crysanthemum petals. The pure stuff is a dark red, very soft and wispy. To maximise its colour, aroma and flavour sit the threads in a small quantity of water or milk for 20minutes then add to the dish when it has only 5 minutes remaining to cook. You can also use it as a garnish to rice, dairy and potato dishes to add a dash of colour. Saffron is also used for male seminal incontinence and sexual exhaustion, which explains why a drink of milk, saffron and honey is given to honeymoon couples. Ayurveda also traditionally used saffron for liver and spleen enlargement as well as for migraines, chronic fevers and epilepsy. Legend says that one who eats saffron will get a golden complexion free of dark pigmentation.

Turmeric

Crowned "the queen of the kitchen" this outstanding spice is the reigning healer amongst kitchen spices. Adored in India for its purifying properties, turmeric is known as *kringhna* in Sanskrit which means germ killer. Turmeric plays an important role in all Hindu rituals, where cleanliness is of prime importance. As an antiseptic wash it is said to give one a golden aura hence its use for bridal baths as well as to counter skin infections or blemishes. Its antiseptic properties also help to combat throat infections. A good home remedy for sore throats is a mixture of 1/2 tsp turmeric and 2 cloves in 1 cup of boiled water. Sit for 5 minutes. Strain and add 1 drop of tea tree oil plus 1 tsps of rock or sea salt. Gargle this warm mix three times a day. The ground turmeric root is the most potent form of this spice but a fresh deep orange powder is also effective. Turmeric's antibiotic, blood purifying and bile stimulating action make it useful in liver, blood and pancreatic disorders. One teaspoon of the fresh powder or ground root can be taken with 1/4 cup of warm water every morning for this. Recent clinical trials have suggested turmeric may also be useful in alzheimers. This may be related to its antioxidant properties, supporting its classical Ayurvedic application for "untimely aging syndrome." To preserve turmeric keep it in a dark container in a cool cupboard.