



Ethnobotanical Leaflets



Cinnamon: It's Not Just For Making Cinnamon Rolls

By Sarah Pittman

Most people around the world are familiar with the sweet and pungent taste of cinnamon. Cinnamon is the common name for the trees and shrubs that belong to the genus *Cinnamomum* of the Laurel family (Lauraceae). Cinnamon spice comes primarily from the Sri Lankan cinnamon known as *Cinnamomum zeylanicum*. It is obtained from the plant by drying the central part of the bark, which is then sold in stick or powdered form. The cinnamon oil is extracted from the waste products of drying and the pointed black fruits that the tree bears (1). This oil is used for medicinal purposes or flavoring (2). *Cinnamomum Zeylanicum* is the source of cinnamon that we in the United States commonly buy. Cinnamon contains cinnamic aldehyde, essential oils, Eugenol, metholeugenol, mucilage, sucrose, starch, and tannin (3).

Distribution

Have you ever wondered where cinnamon comes from? It is unbelievable to think that there is a place somewhere in the world where cinnamon is commonly seen growing along the side of the road. Just imagine walking through campus with cinnamon trees growing all around you. Cinnamon is native to India, Mayala, Ceylon, China, Japan and Taiwan, where it is as common to them as an Oak tree wood be to us (1). The spice grows in a number of tropical forests and is extensively cultivated throughout the tropical regions of the world, including Madagascar, Brazil, and the Caribbean (4). *Cinnamomum zeylanicum*, True Cinnamon is native to Sri Lanka, India, where it was one of the spices responsible for world trade (5).

Description

The *Cinnamomum zeylanicum* tree grows up to thirty feet tall with ovate to ovate-lanceolate leaves that can be four to seven inches long. The flowers are inconspicuous, and the panicles of the yellowish flowers are usually longer than the leaves (6). These panicles bear pointed black fruits from which cinnamon oil is extracted. The cinnamon sticks are made from the bark of the tree and are rolled naturally when the bark is sun-dried. The tree grows best in deep, well-drained, moist soils (1).

Uses

Cinnamon (*Cinnamomum zeylanicum*) has many common everyday uses and some not so common uses. Everybody has probably used cinnamon for some reason, whether for cooking purposes or medicinal purposes. Despite being widely used in food and pharmacy it is also important in the cosmetic and perfumery industries (7). In some areas cinnamon has been known to be used for religious purposes. It is no wonder cinnamon is an important economic plant with all these possible uses for its products.

Cooking Use

Cinnamon is very important in cooking, and it's easy to keep fresh. It is one of the most important spices in the world. Consumption in the U.S. alone is up 6.5 pounds compared to a decade ago. This is mostly due to the increasing interest in ethnic foods, and the increased interest in replacing flavor usually obtained from fats with the flavor of spices and herbs (8).

Most people in this world are probably most familiar with cinnamon when it is used for baking in dessert foods. Many cookies that Americans are familiar with have cinnamon as a main ingredient in them or sprinkled on top of them. Cinnamon rolls are a great example of a dessert pastry that has cinnamon as the main ingredient. Could you imagine what cinnamon rolls would taste like if cinnamon didn't exist? Could you imagine a world without cinnamon rolls or any of the other dessert foods that require cinnamon? The world would be a less sweeter place without cinnamon and the desserts made with it.

As international cooking is becoming more popular, people are starting to find new uses for cinnamon. For instance, cinnamon is an excellent spice used with meat and poultry in Indian and Moroccan dishes. Cinnamon is also commonly found with various Greek dishes. A dash of cinnamon in spaghetti sauce, beef stew, and chili, or with grains and lentils is very appetizing to some people (8). Cinnamon is also used often to flavor rice dishes and fish, chicken, or ham (9). A cinnamon stick can be added to hot chocolate to give it an added cinnamon flavor. There are a number of uses for cinnamon in the kitchen, and cooking with it makes food a whole lot tastier.

Medicinal use

Cinnamon is one of the oldest herbal medicines known, having been mentioned in Chinese texts as long as 4,000 years ago (4). The first medicinal use of cinnamon was in Egypt and parts of Europe as far back as 500 BC. Cinnamon is often used for medicinal purposes due to its unique properties. These main properties of cinnamon are astringent, warming stimulant, carminative, antiseptic, antifungal, anti-viral, blood purifier, and digestive aid (5,10,11). All of these properties of cinnamon make it a good medicinal plant. Cinnamon has many historical medicinal uses in different cultures. Some of these uses include treatment of diarrhea, arthritis, menstrual cramps, heavy menstruation, and yeast infections. Traditionally in many cultures cinnamon was taken as medicine for colds, flu, and digestive problems (10). Today cinnamon is used for many of these same traditional reasons. Often cinnamon is used as a

nonessential addition to other remedies, than as a remedy by itself. Often this is because cinnamon is a stimulant to other herbs and the body, enabling herbal remedies to work faster (11).

The medicinal effects of cinnamon oil are very powerful, and there are many uses for it. Cinnamon oil is one of the most powerful stimulants there is. It is often used as a stimulant in paralysis of the tongue, or to deaden the nerve in a toothache. However, principally it is used as an aromatic to cover the disagreeable taste of other drugs (5).

The various terpenoids found in the spices essential oil are thought to be the reason for cinnamon's medicinal properties. Eugenol and cinnamaldehyde are two very important terpenoids found in cinnamon. Cinnamaldehyde and cinnamon oil vapors act as potent antifungal agents. The diterpenes found in the cinnamon oil have shown antiallergenic activity (4).

The numerous uses for cinnamon as a medicinal herb implies the widespread appreciation herbalists around the world had for its healing effects. Unfortunately there is often no scientific research to backup health claims that cinnamon does in fact have healing powers (4).

Along with the medicinal effects come the side effects and interactions that medicinal cinnamon causes. Some people may be sensitive or allergic to cinnamon. Also, some people may develop dermatitis after exposure to it. Therefore, to take precautions to these possible side effects, only small amounts should be given to a person who lacks prior exposure to it. Chronic chewing of cinnamon gum or use of cinnamon flavored toothpaste can cause inflammation of the mouth, and lead to pre-cancerous growth. The highly concentrated cinnamon oil is more likely to cause side effects than the cinnamon powder (4). Cinnamon oil should never be ingested.

Religious Use

Not only is cinnamon used in cooking, and medicinal healing but it is, also, used for religious purposes. It is believed, by some, that burning cinnamon in incense will promote high spirituality and aid in healing. Some people also believe it can stimulate the passions of a male. The essential oil is often seen spiritually as used for protection (11). There are so many uses for cinnamon that it is hard to believe that most people only know it as an ingredient in their favorite dessert. In a persons lifetime, they probably encounter cinnamon a number of times, in a number of different forms, for a number of different reasons, without being aware of it's presence.

Other Species

There are many other species that are closely related to Common or True Cinnamon. One of these species of cinnamon is called *Cinnamomum cassia*, or Chinese Cinnamon, which was widely used in China before the discovery of True Cinnamon. However, this other species of cinnamon is now thought to be an inferior substitute to *Cinnamomum zeylanicum* (2). *Cinnamomum cassia* is cheaper and more abundant than *Cinnamomum zeylanicum*. Also, it is heavier, less liquid, and congeals more quickly than

True Cinnamon. In the United States *Cinnamomum cassia* is the official oil of cinnamon used for medicinal purposes. Its value is determined by the amount of cinnamic aldehyde it contains. Another type of cinnamon was Saigon Cinnamon which is often known as Annam Cinnamon, China Cinnamon, and God's Cinnamon. *Cinnamomum inners* is the species of Wild Cinnamon found in Japan. This species is also found in Southern India, where the buds are more mature than the form found in Japan. It is used medicinally for the treatment of dysentery, diarrhea and coughs. The bark is commonly used as a condiment (12).

Conclusion

Cinnamon has been a favorite spice since biblical times, and since then has evolved many uses. It has played key roles in nutrition, medicine, religion, and the botanical economy. Cinnamon is a major product sold in the U.S. in any given grocery store. It can be bought in its pure form as cinnamon sticks, spice, or oil. It can, also, be bought as a herbal remedy, an ingredient in baked goods, or as incense. When buying cinnamon use your nose because the more pungent the aroma the better the quality.

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