

Fennel: Seeds, Leaves, and Bulbs for All!

Fennel

Foeniculum vulgare

Above the lower plants it towers,
The Fennel with its yellow flowers;
And in an earlier age than ours
Was gifted with the wondrous powers
Lost vision to restore. - *Longfellow*

I must say that I never expected to open a column with a verse of poetry. But, then again, the world of herbs is full of surprises!

The types of fennel most commonly used today are the perennial *Foeniculum vulgare*, or wild fennel (described in verse, above) and the annual *Foeniculum vulgare dulce*, or Florence fennel. The stalks, seeds and leaves of both plants are used, although Florence fennel is grown specifically for its celery-like stem which swells to a greater size than that of the taller wild fennel, making it more suitable for culinary purposes. The roots of both types are also edible; however, they are not as medicinally effective as other parts of the plant.

Fennel has a fascinating history. It has been cultivated since at least Roman times for both its culinary and medicinal qualities. According to Mrs. Grieve in *A Modern Herbal*, "It is frequently mentioned in Anglo-Saxon cooking and medical recipes prior to the Norman Conquest" and "Fennel shoots, Fennel water, and Fennel seed are all mentioned in an ancient record of Spanish agriculture dating A.D. 961."

As noted above by Longfellow, fennel has long been thought to strengthen the sight, a belief that apparently originates from the herbalist Pliny's observation of snakes eating fennel and rubbing against the plant in order to "sharpen their sight." To this day, an infusion of fennel seeds is highly recommended as a wash for sore, inflamed eyes.

Fennel has a rich history in folklore as well. It was considered to be a good magical herb and was hung over doors on Midsummer's Eve to ward off evil spirits. Greek mythology has it that Prometheus brought fire to earth from the heavens in a hollow fennel stalk.

The ancient Greeks knew this herb as marathron, from maraino, which meant "to grow thin." To grow thin? Yes, I zeroed in on that line too! Fennel seeds act as an appetite suppressant, a quality that made them quite popular on fast days in Medieval times.

Not only can fennel dissuade you from eating, it also has a long-standing reputation for helping the body shed pounds that are already in place. The 17th century writer, William Cole said, "both the seeds, leaves and roots of our Garden Fennel are much used in drinks and broths for those that are grown fat, to abate their unwieldiness and cause them to grow more gaunt and lank."

Basically, fennel causes the digestive system to work more efficiently which, along with its diuretic qualities, explains why it is an effective weight loss aid. It stimulates gastric secretions, regulates intestinal flora and, as a carminative, helps to relieve flatulence and promotes peristalsis.

Chinese herbalists classify fennel seed as spicy, sweet, and warm, which are the usual qualities of carminatives (herbs that aid digestion). The seeds are considered to have stimulant, antispasmodic, and expectorant qualities and are especially recommended for nursing mothers, as they promote the flow of breast milk. Fennel seed tea can alleviate morning sickness and, through the mother's milk, relieve colic in babies.

The seeds impart a subtle anise-like flavor to cookies, cakes, and breads and are an important ingredient in Chinese five-spice mixtures. The roasted seeds are usually offered at the end of Indian meals to help digestion and freshen the breath.

I've been drinking fennel tea for years, (just lightly bruise a teaspoon or so of seeds and steep for five minutes) but I have only recently discovered the wonderful crunch and flavor of fresh Florence fennel. Add the minced bulb to salads; it is especially good with oranges and avocados. You can also cook the bulb, and the fresh leaves are great in salads and vegetable dishes.

When using the fresh leaves in cooking, add them at the very end as heat can destroy the delicate flavor fairly quickly. Many century-old recipes recommend cooking fish on a bed of fennel leaves to take advantage of the herb's ability to "whiten it...and helpeth to digest the crude qualities of fish and viscous meats."

I encourage you to experiment with and learn more about this wonderful herb.

After all, with spring on the way, it can give you a head start on cleansing your system and getting it ready for summer. Happy Equinox!

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