

Turmeric

By: Linda Johnston

From monks' robes to mustard, from Ayurveda to allopathy, turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) is known world-wide as a culinary condiment and healthful herb.

Possibly originating in India, where it is known as the most important of the Ayurvedic spices, turmeric also grows in Asia and Africa. A member of the ginger family Zingiberaceae, it flowers alongside ginger in the Hawaiian Islands, offering its rhizomes (fingers which extend from the root) much as ginger shares its tubers for use in curries and *garam masala* (*foreign word*). But its' use in herbal and western medicine is most fascinating.

The turmeric plant is a perennial with rhizomes which are a deep orange inside. Plant height is approximately three feet. The lanceolate leaves, tapered at each end, are smooth, uniform green and up to two feet long, not including the long stem like petiole. Flowers are a dull yellow, three or five together, surrounded by bracts. It is propagated by cuttings from the rhizomes. Touching the rhizomes without gloves turns skin yellow. Turmeric does well in temperatures between 68-90 degrees Fahrenheit, and could be grown as a houseplant. Keep moist and in a warm, sunny place.

In traditional Chinese medicine and Ayurvedic medicine, turmeric has been used for thousands of years to aid digestion and liver function, relieve arthritis pain, and regulate menstruation. Historically it has also been applied directly to the skin for eczema and wound healing. Today, traditional or folk uses of turmeric include treatment of heartburn, stomach ulcers, gallstones, inflammation and cancer. Over 80% of the worlds' turmeric is consumed in India, a fact that scientists are now exploring as they consider India's low rate of Alzheimer's Disease---the lowest in the world.

Other scientific explorations of turmeric's use in western medicine include studies of inflammation, such as that which occurs in arthritis. Curcumin, the compound which makes turmeric yellow, is the most researched constituent of the herb, and has been found mainly responsible for the anti- inflammatory properties. Perhaps in the near future turmeric will have a greater role in improving the quality of life for individuals suffering from these diseases, without the expense and side effects of pharmaceuticals.

References:

Gladstar, Rosemary. *Rosemary Gladstar's Medicinal Herbs: A Beginner's Guide*, Storey Publishing, N. Adams, MA, 2012.

Turmeric: Herbs at a glance, National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine. www.nccam.gov, February 21, 2016.

Wright, Laura E., *Turmeric and Ginger Extracts In the Prevention of Osteoclastic Bone Destruction*, Physiological Sciences Graduate Interdisciplinary Program, The University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ