

The Practical Herbalist -- Cardamon

Cardamon is a wonderful spice that is often overlooked in the spice cabinet. It is found in many food traditions, even in countries where it is not native, cardamon has a long history in many of the major herbal medical systems around the world. There are many species of plants that are called cardamon, and every culture seems to have a favorite that is considered the only proper cardamon. Chinese herbal medicine recognizes several and uses them interchangeably due to their similar functions.

Cardamon is a member of the zingiberacea family of plants and like its cousin ginger, this family of plants is known for helping the digestion. The cardamon seed is used (unlike the rhizome (root) of the ginger plant) to transform dampness. Dampness is that heavy sluggish quality that we have all felt when eat too much. Many foods, particularly dairy, sugars and greases, are considered damp in nature. Cardamon as a spice was often added to these rich heavy foods. The aromatic, damp transforming nature of cardamon makes heavy rich pasties and desserts more enjoyable because the cardamon helps a person digest the food, eliminating some of that uncomfortable heavy damp feeling that can go along with eating a rich meal.

Cardamon is often part of northern European pastry traditions, where the lard, butter, sugars, refined wheat flour, and cream cheese based fillings can weigh a person down. Cardamon is also a mainstay in the cooking and Ayurvedic medicine of India. Here it is often a part of traditional curry and medicines as a way to counter the dampness of the climate. Aromatic spices in general are usually more predominant in warm humid climates, partially because they are native to these areas, but also it is an appropriate part of the diet to help people cope with the humid weather. Aromatic spices are more of a special occasion spice in dry or northern climates.

Here in Wisconsin cardamon can be especially helpful. Like other aromatic spices, cardamon counters the damp heavy nature of traditional Wisconsin foods, as well as the occasional dampness of the climate. I often recommend regular use of cardamon for patients who consume a lot of dairy products. A dusting over foods or mixed into an after meal hot tea can really help a person feel more energetic after a heavy meal.

Overuse of aromatic spices in a dry or cold climate can “dry out” a person, affecting how they feel, and traditionally it was seen as making a person weaker and more likely to catch a cold other infection. This is why many cultures have seasonal foods. Foods that are appropriate in the winter may be unwise or unavailable during the summer. In our modern day a variety of foods are available, often in large portions, making it easy to feel sluggish or “damp”. It is a good idea to pay attention to how foods make you feel and what spices help you feel your best.

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