



Kali Mirch (Black peppercorn)



Botanical: Piper nigrum
Family: N.O. Piperaceae
Hindi Name: Gol Mirch

Black pepper is probably the most important and popular spice in the whole world. It is added to almost every savoury dish, hot or cold, imparting a sharp and pungent flavour.

Native to southern India, black pepper sparked the start of the spice trade between Asia and Europe and the need for this valuable spice prompted European explorers to travel and trade all over the world.

General Description: The best Pepper of commerce comes from Malabar. Pepper is mentioned by Roman writers in the fifth century. The plant can attain a height of 20 or more feet, but for commercial purposes it is restricted to 12 feet. The plant is propagated by cuttings and grown at the base of trees with a rough, prickly bark to support them. Between three or four years after planting they commence fruiting and their productiveness ends about the fifteenth year. The berries are collected as soon as they turn red and before they are quite ripe; they are then dried in the sun.

Plant: The pepper plant is a perennial woody vine growing to four metres in height on supporting trees, poles, or trellises. It is a spreading vine, rooting readily where trailing stems touch the ground. The leaves are alternate, entire, five to ten centimetres long and three to six centimetres broad. The flowers are small, produced on pendulous spikes four to eight centimetres long at the leaf nodes, the spikes lengthening to seven to 15 centimeters as the fruit matures.

Piper nigrum on tree support in Goa, India.

Black pepper is grown in soil that is neither too dry nor susceptible to flooding, moist, well-drained and rich in organic matter (the vines do not do too well over an altitude of 3000ft above sea level). The plants are propagated by cuttings about 40 to 50 centimetres long, tied up to neighbouring trees or climbing frames at distances of about two metres apart; trees with rough bark are favoured over those with smooth bark, as the pepper plants climb rough bark more readily.

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Competing plants are cleared away, leaving only sufficient trees to provide shade and permit free ventilation. The roots are covered in leaf mulch and manure, and the shoots are trimmed twice a year. On dry soils the young plants require watering every other day during the dry season for the first three years. The plants bear fruit from the fourth or fifth year, and typically continue to bear fruit for seven years. The cuttings are usually cultivars, selected both for yield and quality of fruit. A single stem will bear 20 to 30 fruiting spikes. The harvest begins as soon as one or two fruits at the base of the spikes begin to turn red, and before the fruit is mature, but when full grown and still hard; if allowed to ripen, the fruits lose pungency, and ultimately fall off and are lost. The spikes are collected and spread out to dry in the sun, then the peppercorns are stripped off the spikes.

Black pepper is native to India. Within the genus *Piper*, it is most closely related to other Asian species such as *Piper caninum*.

using black pepper in the kitchen: Black pepper can be added to almost any savoury dish imaginable but surprisingly, it can also be added to sweet biscuits and cakes in order to spice them up and add a quirky twist.

Here are some more ideas of how to use black pepper in your cooking:

- * Add to salad dressings with salt, olive oil and cider vinegar.
- * Add to omelettes, egg mayonnaise and other cheese and egg dishes.
- * Black pepper can be added to strawberries or pineapple.
- * It can be added to soups, stocks, sauces, marinades and stews.
- * Use to flavour homemade hamburgers, rissoles and sausages.
- * Use to rub onto meats, poultry and fish before roasting or cooking.
- * Use to make pepper sauce.
- * Add to biscuit mixtures for spicy sweet biscuits.
- * Season seafood with black pepper.
- * Add to mashed potato.
- * Use to flavour dips, salsas and cold sauces.

Benefits of Black Pepper: Black pepper has more healthy properties than most people know about. Black pepper isn't like salt that can make food less healthy if too much is added. Black pepper is a spice that has the potential to make food more beneficial when used in various recipes and as a table spice.

Varieties: In trade, the pepper grades are identified by their origin. In India -> The most important Indian grades are Malabar and Tellicherry (Thalassery). The Malabar grade is regular black pepper with a slightly greenish hue, while Tellicherry is a special product. Both Indian black peppers, but especially the Tellicherry grade, are very aromatic and pungent. In the past, Malabar pepper was also traded under names like Goa or Aleppi. Cochin is the pepper trade center in India.

In South East Asia, the most reputed proveniences for black pepper are Sarawak in Malaysia and Lampung from Sumatra/Indonesia. Both produce small-fruited black pepper that takes on a greyish colour during storage; both have a less-developed aroma, but Lampung pepper is pretty hot. Sarawak pepper is mild and often described fruity.

Buying and storing black pepper: Black pepper can be bought either as whole peppercorns or ground pepper. Ground black pepper is not as pungent or flavourful as freshly ground peppercorns and it does not keep for as long either.

One of the reasons why black peppercorns were so valuable centuries ago is because they can be stored for almost indefinitely without losing their quality, taste or aroma.

Dishes always taste better when freshly ground black pepper is added near the end of cooking time or just before serving.

The History of Black Pepper: Black pepper has a history of at least 4000 years. It is indigenous to India and gradually began to make its way eastwards to Southeast Asia where it is now also cultivated and grown. Some of the major producers of black pepper nowadays are India, Indonesia, Vietnam, Brazil, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and China.

Pepper was so valuable for a number of reasons, one of them being its ability to disguise food that was not as fresh as it should have been. It was also used to liven up and give a kick to dishes that were somewhat tasteless and not very appetizing otherwise.

For these reasons and more pepper was not only used as a spice and seasoning for food, it was also used as a method of payment in exchange for other goods and even to pay taxes, dowries and even rent.

In ancient Greece, pepper was offered to the gods in sacred rituals and was even swapped for gold. Fortunately, nowadays pepper is not that expensive.



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