

The Forgotten Fennel

As every history of Fennel points out, in ancient Greece the word for fennel was 'marathon'. This name came about because of the Greek victory over the Persians in 470 B.C. at Marathon which was fought on a field planted with fennel. Even before then however, Fennel had its place in Greek mythology, for knowledge was said to have come to man as a gift from Prometheus who stole it from the gods and presented it in the form of a fiery coal held in a fennel stalk.

Another example of a once famous medicine that has slipped into our supermarkets unacknowledged, the ancient Romans chewed fennel stalks in the belief that it would control obesity. This is sound advice, for fennel not only increases the digestive processes and boosts the metabolism, but it also exerts a powerful action upon the kidneys and their control of the body's fluid balance. In fact Discorides, a renowned physician from ancient Greece, prescribed fennel for those "who can but piss one drop at a time". Fennel was also considered to be an appetite suppressant by the Puritans, as they would chew fennel seeds during periods of religious fasting to keep themselves from growing hungry. It was known in their communities as a "meeting seed", meaning it was one of several seeds that parishioners chewed during church meetings to stay awake. These days, when combined in juices with celery, carrot and parsley, most naturopaths would agree that fennel can be a powerful tool for detoxification and weight loss.

In Medieval times, fennel was considered sacred herbs used to treat a wide range of infectious diseases, and was even hung from the rafters to bring good luck, and put in keyholes to keep out evil spirits. This perhaps reflects its antibacterial action which is most probably due to the high essential oil content of its seeds. Although traditionally used for everything from snakebites to tooth and earaches, its antibacterial action is best documented for respiratory conditions. In this way it has been used like aniseed and licorice in a wide array of cough syrups to open the chest, increase expectoration and relax the diaphragm. It is also a favorite in children's formulas due to its pleasant sweet taste.

Not only useful for children's chesty coughs, it is a famous ingredient in gripe-water for colic and wind. A weak fennel tea is safe in small amounts for babies of all ages, but breast feeding mums can simply drink the tea themselves and allow their body to filter out anything unwanted and still benefit from its effects. The only caution in this regard, is that fennel tea is an excellent breast milk stimulant and should be avoided by mothers who over produce milk as it can cause some discomfort.

Whether, sliced raw in salads, slow roasted with potato or simply juiced, organic fennel is a delicious food and powerful medicine that is safe for home use.

- The Barefoot Doctor