

# The East London Garden Society

## Plant Facts

### Amaranth



Botanical name: Amaranthus

Cultivated by the Aztecs 8,000 years ago and still a native crop in Peru, the ancient history of amaranth can be traced to Mexico and the Yucatan Peninsula. Today it is grown in Africa, India, China, Russia, throughout South America and emerging once again in North America.

Somewhat of an unknown quantity to many, amaranth is often six feet tall with broad green leaves and bright red or gold flowers. There are around sixty different species. The flowers are made up of miniscule grain-like buds, which is why this plant often falls into the 'grain' category. But amaranth is not technically a grain like oats, wheat or rice. It is sometimes referred to as a 'pseudo-cereal' because its nutritional profile is very similar.

One of the most important aspects of this tiny grain is that it is gluten free and when ground the flour is generally a pale ivory shade although the red buds can also be ground to produce a red tinged and very nutritious grain.

Being extremely dense, amaranth is too heavy to be used by itself.



It is best used with other grains for a lighter texture and with a proven combination of ingredients like guar gum to impersonate gluten.

Cooking amaranth is comparable to cooking pasta or rice. Boil six cups of water per one cup of amaranth, add the grain and stir whilst cooking for 15 to 20 minutes. Drain and rinse before eating.

Amaranth can be used as an exceptional thickener for sauces, soups, stews and even jellies. Eaten as a snack, amaranth can have a light, nutty or peppery crunchy texture and flavour.

One reason amaranth is emerging into the forefront among grains is because of its remarkable nutrition. It is higher in minerals such as calcium, iron, phosphorous and carotenoids than most vegetables. It has truly remarkable protein content. Cup for cup, 28.1 grams of protein compared to 26.3 grams in oats and 13.1 grams in rice.

Amaranth is a great source of lysine, an important amino acid with protein content comparable to that of milk and more easily digested. To support this positive aspect of amaranth, it also contains primary proteins called albumin and globulins which in comparison with the prolamins in wheat are more soluble and digestible.

One cup of raw amaranth contains 15 milligrams of iron whilst white rice contains only 1.5 milligrams. One cup of raw amaranth also contains 18 milligrams of fibre whilst white rice contains 2.4 grams.

At 105% of the daily value per serving, the manganese in amaranth is off the charts yet it contains fewer carbohydrates. Amaranth contains more than three times the amount of calcium and it is also high in magnesium, phosphorus and potassium. Amaranth contains 6 to 10% of oil which is predominantly unsaturated, or around 77% unsaturated fatty acids including linoleic acid that is required for optimum nutrition. Amaranth is also the only grain with documented vitamin C content.

A study on amaranth reported that its seeds also contain important nutritional properties with the ability to help lower hypertension and incidences of cancer. Test results also concluded that amaranth oil could be a functional food product for preventing and treating cardiovascular diseases.

Named after the Greek word 'amarantos', which means 'one that does not wither', colourful amaranth flower buds stay vibrant even after drying. Cultivated by the Aztecs 8,000 years ago, amaranth is still popular in many cultures and becoming more so in recent years. It can be popped like corn, cooked similar to rice or pasta or ground to flour.

Amaranth is a true powerhouse and known to help prevent a number of chronic health conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, cancer and stroke. Luckily, it can be found in most supermarkets.