

The East London Garden Society

Plant Facts

Tamarind



Deliciously tangy and one of the most highly prized natural foods in South Asia, the tamarind is gaining recognition and appreciation throughout the world. Its botanical name is *Tamarindus Indica* and comes from the Persian 'Tamar-I-hind', meaning 'date of India'. Native to Africa, this exotic fruit grows on exceptionally tall trees of the Fabaceae family, such as peas, beans and other legumes mostly in the warmer, dryer areas of Asia, Mexico and India.

Tamarind trees produce an abundance of long, curved, brown pods filled with small brown seeds surrounded by a sticky pulp that dehydrates naturally to a sticky paste. The pods look like huge, brown, overly mature green beans.

After harvest, tamarinds are sometimes shelled in preparation for export where they are often pressed into balls and layered with sugary water or syrup or sometimes salted.

Like most ancient foods, tamarind has a long history of medicinal uses. Many involve easing stomach discomfort, aiding digestion and use as a laxative. Tamarind preparations are used for fevers, sore throat, rheumatism, inflammation and sunstroke. Dried or boiled tamarind leaves and flowers are made into poultices for swollen joints, sprains, boils, haemorrhoids and conjunctivitis.

Similar to the natural gums and pectin found in other foods, the sticky pulp contributes to its dietary fibre content. They bind with bile to help flush waste through the colon, decreasing the chances of it sticking around.

Each 100 grams of tamarind contain 36% of the thiamine, 35% of the iron, 23% of magnesium and 16% of the phosphorus recommended for a day's worth of nutrition. Other prominent nutrients include niacin, calcium, vitamin C, copper and pyridoxine.

Tamarinds also contain high levels of tartaric acid, just as citrus fruits contain citric acid, and provide not just a zing to the taste buds but powerful antioxidant action zapping harmful free radicals floating through your system.

Known to be useful in traditional medicine for diabetes and obesity, tamarind seed extract underwent examination to see if might increase glucose uptake in such patients. They showed a marked anti-diabetic effect, indicating the possibility of formulating a new tamarind seed extract-based herbal drug for diabetes therapy.

In another study many of the traditional medical uses for Phytochemical rich tamarind extracts were reported by researchers as useful in modern medicine. Successful therapies included abdominal pain, diarrhoea, dysentery, parasitic infections, fevers and constipation, inflammation, gonorrhoea and eye diseases.

In the Bahamas, large but still unripe tamarind fruits called 'swells' are roasted in coals until their skins burst open. The sizzling pulp is then dipped in wood ashes and eaten as a quick snack.

It's a condiment; it's a spice; it's a bean. The 'Manila Sweet', as the tamarind is sometimes called, is all of these. Tamarind seed extract, which is deliciously tangy, is one of the most highly prized foods in Asian and Indian cuisine.