Cloves ready for harvesting

Spices have great health benefits as well as adding zing to recipes

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Spice up your life

Without cinnamon, cloves, vanilla and cardamom, Christmas wouldn't taste half as good. Their flavours enhance aromatic cakes and pastries, and they also have bonus health benefits. Pamela Spence explains the hidden properties of spices and how you can use them to decorate your festive creations

These energy biscuits are made with cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg. Turn to page 76 for the recipe

A miniature bouquet of spices is an original gift for your host at Christmas-time

Pamela Spence medical herbalist and owner of The Carrick Clinic in Ayrshire has been fascinated by spices and medicinal plants for years. Much of her interest stems from her childhood in South East Asia and the fragrant spice markets and traditional healers she grew up around

Until modern times, nutmeg, black pepper, cloves and cardamom were considered to be luxury goods in Europe because the only way of transporting them was via arduous overland journeys along ancient caravan routes before sailing to Asia was possible. This meant that only royal families and the aristocracy were able to afford exotic spices. Fortunately we can now all easily access their sumptuous flavours and use them daily in our homes.

Spices can be used to enhance our health just as much as our cooking. Chemicals contained by the plants including essential oils, vitamins, enzymes, bitter substances, tannins, mucilage, minerals and trace elements can all have a positive influence on our health. Pamela Spence has been working with spices for many years. She has been particularly influenced by her years growing up in Singapore where she learned about the many different Asian cuisines that use a vast array of hot and pungent spices.

What health advantages do cinnamon, cloves, cardamom and ginger have?

PAMELA SPENCE: As well as flavouring dishes and preserving meat these spices often have properties that stimulate blood flow – that's why they can make us feel warm. They stimulate the gastro-intestinal tract and promote digestion by encouraging the production of digestive juices which helps us to break down and process food better. Applied topically, for example in massage oil, they promote the blood supply to the local area creating a warming effect on the skin which can reduce pain. Cinnamon, ▶

CREATE A PRETTY AND DELICIOUS BOUQUET GARNI FOR WINTER SOUPS

Ingredients: A selection of herbs such as sage, parsley, thyme, rosemary, bay leaves, mugwort, lovage or savoury; a rosebud; star anise and florists wire.

Preparation: Remove all thorns from the rose and shorten the stem to the required length. Arrange the other herbs around it and tie together with florists wire. Finally decorate the bouquet with one or more star anise fruits.

Use: With the exception of the rose – which is just for decoration – the herbs and spices can be used either fresh or dried. To make a game marinade you could, for instance, use rosemary, thyme, a bay leaf, sage and a little mugwort if you can get it. Other good marinade ingredients would be juniper berries, peppercorns, onions and garlic. Depending on your taste, lovage, parsley, thyme, bay leaves, savoury and rosemary are all great additions to warming winter soups and casseroles.

Vanilla flower

Nutmeg

Cardamom plant

Cloves

Cinnamon tree

Spices in their natural habitat

Vanilla pods, or capsules to give them their botanically correct name, are the fruits of various tropical varieties of orchid. Their typical flavour develops through a complex drying and preparation process

Nutmeg is not a true nut, but the kernel of the nutmeg tree which is native to the Spice Islands

Green cardamom, not to be confused with the black cardamom also popular in Indian cooking, develops from the flowers of the cardamom plant, which belongs to the ginger family. The capsule fruits develop on the side shoots of the plants which grow along the ground

Cloves are the name we give to the flower buds of the clove tree. They are picked by hand and dried in the sun

Cinnamon is obtained from the bark of the cinnamon tree – the thinner the bark, the finer the flavour. There is a difference between Ceylon cinnamon and the cheaper Cassia cinnamon which does not have the same health giving properties

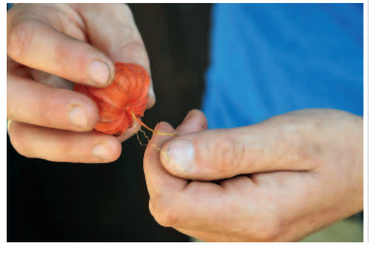
cloves, cardamom, black pepper and ginger have a stimulating, vitalising and tonic effect. Hildegard von Bingen, a famous medieval healer, recommended powerful, sun-kissed spices such as these to elevate the mood during long dark winters in Europe.

Can you briefly list the most important health applications for these spices?
PAMELA SPENCE: They are almost too many to mention! Ginger is highly aromatic and is a well-known home remedy for colds and also to help relieve nausea. I also like it to increase circulation in cold fingers and toes in the winter. Cinnamon is a lovely warming digestive that helps because of its antispasmodic effect. Some studies have also shown that it can help to keep blood sugars level. Cloves are very antiseptic and analgesic – which is why an old remedy you might remember, is to suck on a clove to relieve toothache. You just place a clove on the tooth that hurts and by chewing it slightly you release the active ingredients. We also use cardamom a lot and its aromatic oils help with digestion and can also stimulates the brain so it is a great pick-me-up for long afternoons. Finally we have pepper, in all its colours – black, white, green and pink – all wonderful for improving circulation and gently supporting detoxification.

Is it a good idea to consistently include specific spices in your diet over an extended period in order to reap the health benefits?
PAMELA SPENCE: Absolutely! Many studies have shown that the spices eaten daily in Indian cooking, like turmeric for example, hold great health benefits. Generally speaking it is very safe to take spices in this way as the doses you use in cooking are moderated by the taste. This is a much more natural way to make these healthy additions to our diet rather than by taking high dose supplements with isolated constituents, for example. We should remember that they do have medicinal actions so high doses can sometimes be contra-indicated, whereas any whole spice regularly used in traditional cooking will be when safe used in that way.

CREATE FRUITY MULLED WINE

Ingredients: 700ml white wine, 10-15 cloves, 2 cinnamon sticks, approx. 3 tablespoons sugar, 1 vanilla pod, 1 organic lemon
Preparation: Warm the wine, spices, sugar and sliced lemon in a pan. Open up the vanilla pod using a sharp knife and scrape out the seeds. Add the pod and seeds to the wine. Heat the wine to a medium temperature, but do not let it boil or it will spoil the flavour. Pour the drink through a fine sieve, or through a coffee filter, if you prefer to remove the vanilla seeds.
Use: When drunk hot, this mulled wine banishes unpleasant shivers, relaxes you after a strenuous day and stimulates the digestion. You can pour it into bottles and keep it in the fridge, then heat it up in batches as required, or simply enjoy it cold.



MAKE A FRAGRANT FESTIVE FLOWER DISPLAY WITH HERBS AND SPICES

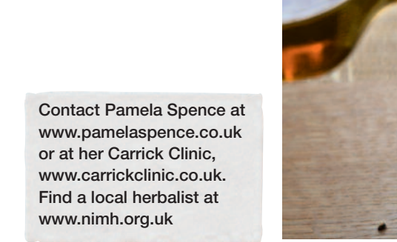
What you need: Sprays of pine and spruce; sprigs of herbs like thyme, mugwort, rose hip, crab apple and eucalyptus; whole cinnamon sticks; red chilli peppers; star anise; pine cones; Chinese lanterns; juniper berries; florists wire; 1 candle; 6 candle wax stickers and 1 window box drip tray.
Instructions: To form the base, distribute a few sprays of greenery along the length of the drip tray and fasten with florists wire. Place the candle in the middle and fix in place with the candle wax stickers. Introduce sprays of mugwort, thyme, crab apple and rose hip, as well as cinnamon sticks and pine cones, into the arrangement. Tie florists wire onto the orange Chinese lanterns and fasten individually to the twigs with the wire. Finally fill the cinnamon sticks with juniper berries and decorate with red chilli peppers and star anise. ▶

How do your recognise good quality when you are buying spices?
PAMELA SPENCE: You should always buy spices whole rather than ground because the ground spices lose their aromatic oils very quickly. It is also easier to make sure you are buying the right thing if you buy it whole – and then you know the powder has not been mixed with cheaper spices. With cinnamon this is particularly important as the cheaper Cassia cinnamon is often used for ground cinnamon, rather than the more expensive Ceylon variety. For cardamom, you can recognise good pods because they are tightly closed with a fresh green colour, cloves should have firm heads that secrete a little oil if you press them lightly, ginger root should be firm and nutmegs should be smooth and spherical in shape. Graters, mortar & pestles, and coffee grinders are all suitable for grinding spices.

How and where can you keep spices so they hold their flavour for as long as possible?
PAMELA SPENCE: You can actually keep dried spices for years, but they do lose their strength over time. It is best to store them in ceramic or dark glass jars with well-sealed lids in a dry, dark, cool place. The ubiquitous spice rack on display by the cooker is not ideal because the heat and damp quickly affects the flavour.

BAKE THESE ENERGY BISCUITS INSPIRED BY HILDEGARD VON BINGEN

Ingredients: 250g butter, 150g brown sugar, 2 packets vanilla sugar, 2 eggs, 300g spelt flour, 200g ground almonds, 22g cinnamon, 5g cloves, 10g nutmeg
Preparation: Quickly combine the ingredients to form dough. Do not knead for too long, otherwise the butter will get warm and the dough will crumble. Wrap the dough in clingfilm and place in the fridge for at least 30 minutes. Grease a baking tray or two round cake tins and roll out the dough firstly with your hands, then with the rolling pin to around 2cm thick. Bake at 180°C/350°F/Gas Mark 4 for 20 to 25 minutes. Remove from the oven, leave to cool and cut into your favourite Christmas shapes.
Use: According to Hildegard von Bingen, the medieval herbalist, these energy biscuits should act as a nerve tonic, and dispel tiredness and gloomy thoughts. Due to nutmeg's strong effect (see right), limit yourself to three biscuits daily!



You will find nutmeg in almost every cuisine. Its intense flavour enriches soups, sauces, mashed potato and spinach, as well as sweet cakes and pastries. Nutmeg is only used in small amounts because it has such a strong taste but also because it can cause headaches, nausea, vomiting, dizziness and diarrhoea if more than 4g (around half a nutmeg) is consumed. As with all herbs and spices, dose plays a crucial role, because in small amounts the nutmeg's essential oil regulates the digestive system and has an antibacterial, anti-inflammatory and mood-enhancing effect. We have, therefore, slightly changed Hildegard von Bingen's original medieval recipe for energy biscuits and are only using half the amount of nutmeg she specified.

FIND HEADACHE RELIEF WITH CARDAMOM AND CINNAMON

Ingredients: 50ml sesame oil, 5 cardamom pods, 1 cinnamon stick, 1 clear screw-top jar
Preparation: Crush the cardamom pods with the flat side of a knife or grind with a mortar and pestle. Cut the cinnamon sticks into small pieces. Mix the cinnamon and cardamom together with the oil in a glass jar, seal with a lid and place in a warm spot by the window. Shake daily for around 2 weeks, then filter and keep the infused oil in the jar in a cool dark place.
Use: For tension headaches, warm the oil slightly and massage it gently into the temples and forehead using circular movements

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