

Herb of the Month: Cinnamon

This herb is one of the oldest spices known. The "immortal spice" was mentioned in the Bible and was used in ancient Egypt not only as a beverage flavoring and medicine, but also as an embalming agent. Indigenous to Sri Lanka, it was once revered as being more valuable than gold. Cinnamon also received much attention in China, being mentioned in one of the earliest books on Chinese botanical medicine, dated around 2,700 B. C. The best quality Cinnamon is still grown in Sri Lanka and has these characteristics: A very thin smooth bark, a light yellow-brown color, and a highly fragrant bouquet with a peculiarly sweet, warm-spicy, pleasing aromatic taste. The evergreen tree grows from 20 to 30 feet high and is known botanically as Cinnamon verum or Cinnamon zeylanicum. It has oblong greenish leaves with small flowers and a single purple seed the size of a blackberry. A sapling is planted and two years later cut back. The next year, a dozen or so shoots form from the base of the roots. These shoots are then stripped of their outer bark and left to dry. Only the thin inner bark is harvested which, when dried, curls into rolls, quills or (as we know them) sticks.

Two parts of Cinnamon cassia, of Chinese origin, are used: Rou Gui (Cinnamon bark) and Gui Zhi (Cinnamon twig). Cinnamon twig is the small branch of the tree collected between March and July. It is mostly used for medical use in China. The young twig of Cinnamon strengthens the body and is said to result in a more youthful complexion. Cinnamon twig can be used to relax neck and shoulder tension. It is categorized as a warm herb, capable of warming the entire body and is primarily used in Chinese herbalism to open blood channels and thus to improve circulation. It is not as deeply tonifying as the much older and richer. This herb is an excellent addition to your medicine cabinet and also your winter kitchen for culinary uses. Cinnamon cassia is the most easily available and most common in the market place.

Cinnamon's unique healing abilities come from three basic types of components in the essential oils found in its bark. These oils contain active components called cinnamaldehyde, cinnamyl acetate, and cinnamyl alcohol, plus a wide range of other volatile oils. It is an excellent source of manganese and a good source of iron and calcium. C. verum has been found to mimic insulin activity in vitro. In a variety of studies it has been found to assist the body's conversion of sugar (glucose) into energy. In addition to improving cellular glucose metabolism, cinnamon may provide additional benefits for people with diabetes through its antioxidant activity. The specific antioxidant phytochemicals that have been identified in cinnamon include epicatechin, camphene, eugenol, gamma-terpinene, phenol, salicylic acid, and tannins. It is also usually high in flavonoids and also may be synergistic with vitamins and trace minerals as well. Medicinally, Cinnamon has been used as a carminative (digestive aid), astringent (drawing together tissue), stimulant (arouses and accelerates), antiseptic, antifungal, antiviral and anti microbial. The Commission E (Germany) approved the internal use of cinnamon for loss of appetite, dyspeptic complaints such as mild, spastic condition of the gastrointestinal tract, bloating, and flatulence. In France, cinnamon bark is traditionally used to treat digestive disorders and to facilitate weight gain. It has also been well researched for its anti-clotting ability of blood platelets.

Good Earth has many varieties of cinnamon in our bulk herb department - sticks, chips and powder, and in our supplement department find liquid extracts and gel caps. Cinnamon makes medicine taste good.

