



HERBS
with ROSALEE

NUTMEG

by Rosalee de la Forêt



Nutmeg

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HERBS

with ROSALEE

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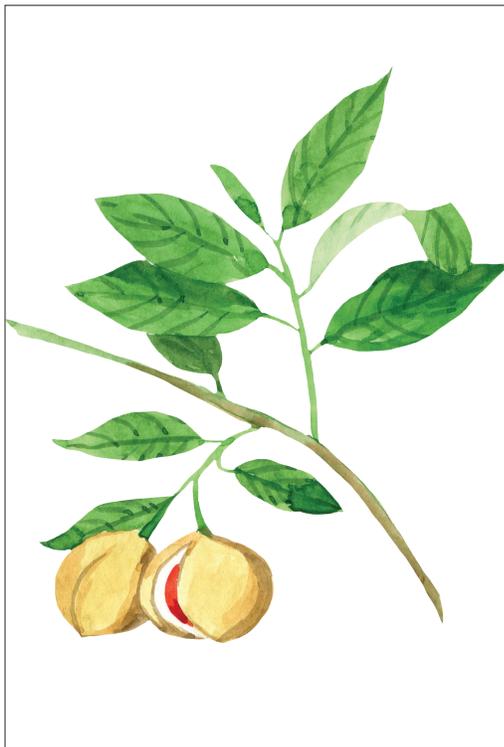


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Nutmeg Summary



Botanical name: *Myristica fragrans*

Family: *Myristicaceae*

Parts Used: seed, aril (the seed covering, known as mace)

Taste: pungent, sweet

Energetics: warming, drying

Plant Properties: relaxant, aromatic, antispasmodic, aphrodisiac, carminative, antimicrobial, antiemetic, hypotensive, anthelmintic

Plant Uses: insomnia, stress, common digestive problems such as gas/bloating and diarrhea

Plant Preparations: Cold infusion (internally and externally), decoction, tea, powder, low alcohol tincture, food

Plant Preparations: freshly ground powder, essential oil

Introduction

On the far eastern end of Indonesia, in the Banda Islands — once called the Spice Islands — a large pigeon devours a fleshy, cream-colored fruit along with the seed inside. This aromatic seed remains unharmed and is eventually coughed up by the bird into the surrounding lush tropical forest.

The seed germinates in the rich volcanic soil and a tree begins to emerge. If this dioecious tree is female, it will produce its first fruit within 9-12 years. The mature tree will produce about 2,000 fruits per year after about 20 years. The tree will eventually be around 20 feet tall and live for three-quarters of a century.



When you hold nutmeg in your hand, you are truly holding a special treasure. That sweet and aromatic spice is often taken for granted as a “pumpkin” spice to be occasionally used in holiday baking. But the nutmeg tree and its fruits are powerful medicine.

Nutmeg has a rich and sometimes sad history. Its fruit, seed, and seed covering (mace) have been highly prized as both food and medicine for thousands of years. Europeans became so obsessed with this spice that atrocities were committed and blood was shed in the effort to acquire it.

“If a person eats nutmeg, it will open up his heart, make his judgment free from obstruction, and give him a good disposition.”

*Hildegard von Bingen
around 1151 CE*

History of Nutmeg

Nutmeg is native to the remote Banda Islands of Indonesia, north of Australia. For thousands of years, the Banda people harvested the nutmeg tree’s fruit, seed, and seed covering (mace) to use as food and medicine. They also traded nutmeg extensively with surrounding islands.

It is easy to love this sweet and aromatic spice, so when it arrived in Europe through the spice trade route, Europeans fell head over heels for it. Not only did it taste delicious, it was believed to stop the plague and was used as a hallucinogen.

When the European spice trade over land was stopped in 1453 (due to the successful siege of Constantinople by Mehmed II), the race to win the spice trade over the seas began. European countries braved the open sea to discover a route to the East Indies and the treasure of spices growing there. To get an idea of how lucrative this endeavor was, the price of nutmeg was so high in Europe that one small bag of nutmeg seeds supposedly could guarantee a life of retirement for a sailor.

The Portuguese were the first to make it to the Banda Islands, but it would be the Dutch who would eventually take control of the islands through an ill-fated treaty, followed by horrific violence and force against the Banda people.

After many battles had been fought and many years had passed, the Dutch sat down with the British in 1667 to create a treaty to formally settle their differences. The Dutch wanted control of one of the small Banda Islands that the British had managed to gain control of. In return, the British wanted the island New Amsterdam located in the “new” Western world. The treaty was signed and that is how the British traded nutmeg for what is now called Manhattan.

Much of the written history of nutmeg and the spice wars focuses on the skirmishes between European countries. But while Europeans were satisfying their greed, the Banda people were all but destroyed. Despite their resistance, they were overrun and scattered throughout Indonesia.



In time, the French were able to smuggle enough nutmeg seeds from the Banda Islands to grow their own nutmeg farms in tropical regions, thus breaking the Dutch monopoly.

Today, much of the nutmeg we buy in the US is grown in Grenada, a state in the West Indies of the Caribbean Sea. Nutmeg cultivation has its own problems: a 2017 study found that there was a “high prevalence of respiratory symptoms among workers” in a nutmeg factory due to hazardous working conditions.¹ Another study showed severe harm caused to a man using pesticides on a nutmeg plantation.²

Nutmeg as Medicine

Nutmeg is commonly used as a culinary spice. The US imports many tons and millions of dollars’ worth of nutmeg from around the world. Most of this is ground and sold for use in baking, especially during the holidays.

But nutmeg is more than a simple culinary spice. It’s powerful medicine that can be used for anxiety, sleep issues, digestion, colds, the flu, and more.

Nutmeg Seed vs. Mace

There are two spices that come from the nutmeg tree: the nutmeg seed and the seed covering known as mace.

Mace is a beautiful and bright red aril (seed covering) located around the nutmeg seed. It is used in cooking and as a medicinal spice. Mace tends to be more pungent than the nutmeg seed.

The spice commonly known as nutmeg comes from the brown seed located inside of the aril/mace. This article is mainly focused on using the nutmeg seed.

Insomnia

Nutmeg is a powerful herbal sedative and relaxant. It’s ideal for people who wake in the middle of the night as it is a reliable sedative for eight hours.

How you approach nutmeg depends on the person and their constitution.





For example, for mild sleeplessness or simply to relax at night, using a pinch of nutmeg in warmed milk can be a soothing way to wind down.

On the other hand, when using nutmeg for severe insomnia, it's used in larger amounts and in a specific way. I learned the following approach from my mentor, Karta Purkh Singh Khalsa, and have seen it work countless times for my own herbal clients.

It matters when you take the nutmeg. Nutmeg takes two to six hours to have an effect, so it has to be taken several hours before bedtime. The sedative effect of nutmeg lasts for eight hours, so the effects need to be in place eight hours before a person needs to be awake. If someone took nutmeg at 10pm, then it wouldn't kick in for a couple of hours

and the sedative effects could last until mid-to-late-morning! If a person needs to get up at 6am, then they would want nutmeg's eight-hour-long sedation to kick in at 10pm and would need to take their dose around 6pm in the evening.

The dosage for nutmeg can be a bit tricky. The amount taken is anywhere from 1-10 grams. Because nutmeg can create unwanted effects at larger dosages, it is important to start with a low dose and slowly increase the amount.

Nutmeg is best for short-term use in order to help reset someone's sleep patterns. However, there are usually underlying reasons for insomnia that also need to be concurrently addressed for a positive resolution. Because nutmeg is such a powerful herbal medicine, it's a good idea to consult with an experienced practitioner before using it.

Digestive Issues

Nutmeg is a warming and aromatic spice that can relieve many uncomfortable digestive symptoms. It is commonly used to warm the digestion when there is bloating and gas. It can also relieve diarrhea and is commonly used with children. I recommend mixing nutmeg powder with cinnamon powder and stirring the dose into apple sauce as a palatable delivery method.

Aromatic culinary spices are a wonderful way to prevent common digestive problems. Nutmeg can also be mixed with other spices like ginger, cinnamon, and cloves in an herbal chai to relieve digestive discomfort.

There is some evidence that nutmeg can also be used against intestinal worms (anthelmintic).³



Colds and the Flu

Several historical texts from the Eclectic physicians (early 20th-century herbalists) mention using nutmeg as a poultice to relieve symptoms of colds and influenza. I haven't tried this myself, as I am more likely to reach for elderberry and garlic, but I wanted to include this quote from Felter. If you use nutmeg for colds or other upper respiratory symptoms, I'd love to hear about it in the comments!

“Grated upon a larded cloth and applied warm we have found it to give prompt and grateful relief in soreness of the chest attending an acute cold or the beginning of acute respiratory inflammation.”

*Harvey Wickes Felter
The Eclectic Materia Medica, 1922*

Aphrodisiac

Nutmeg is often called an aphrodisiac and is added in small amounts to herbal aphrodisiac potions. Aphrodisiac is a troublesome term, since it gives the illusion that someone taking it suddenly joins the plot of a cheesy 1980s film where they fall helplessly in love with the first person they see.

In reality, an aphrodisiac herb can have many different methods of influencing our feelings and receptiveness for a romantic encounter. For example, someone who under a lot of stress and unable to relax might find a relaxing nervine to be an aphrodisiac because it relieves their tension. Someone who is suffering from chronic sleep deficiency and is tired all the time may find that an adaptogenic herb helps them get the rest they need, leaving them more refreshed and open to expending energy in the bedroom. Someone who feels a lack of physical responsiveness may respond well to a circulatory stimulant. Someone who is deterred from sexual interaction by dry membranes may find that regularly taking a moistening herb may help them be juicier. As you can see, there are many modes of action that could be described as “aphrodisiac.”

Nutmeg is a delicious herb that is also relaxing and calming. Don't expect it to be the magical secret ingredient in your love potion; however, if someone has a lot of anxiety, stress, or perhaps insomnia, nutmeg may be able to support relaxation and sleep. Being well rested and calm can undoubtedly help to remove these stressful barriers to sex.

Or, as Hildegard von Bingen points out, nutmeg can get rid of bitterness in your heart and make you more pleasant and cheerful.

“Take some nutmeg and an equal weight of cinnamon and a bit of cloves, and pulverize them. Then make small cakes with this and fine whole wheat flour and water. Eat them often. it will calm all bitterness of the heart and mind, open your heart and impaired senses, and make your mind cheerful.”

*Hildegard von Bingen
around 1151 CE*



Nutmeg can also support male sexual health and has been used for benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH), impotence, and premature ejaculation. There are ways that nutmeg can help all sorts of people feel healthy, relaxed, and open to love.

“Like valerian, nutmeg is a versatile herb with many other benefits. It has been used in Ayurveda throughout the history of that healing system, for a diverse range of conditions. It is a warming agent, a good cardiovascular tonic, helps lower blood pressure, increases circulation and enhances digestion. It is also a useful tonic for men, recommended as part of treatment for benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH), infertility, impotence, and premature ejaculation. It has been used as an aphrodisiac.”

Robyn Landis and Karta Purkh Singh Khalsa⁴

Hypertension

Nutmeg has hypotensive abilities and can potentially reduce blood pressure. I haven't seen modern herbalists using nutmeg for that specific purpose; however, it is something to keep in mind when using medicinal amounts of nutmeg in someone who tends to have low blood pressure.

Botanically Speaking

Nutmeg is the seed from the fruit of a large evergreen tree that grows in tropical regions.

The tree has oblong, evergreen leaves.

The flowers are cream colored.

The tree is dioecious, meaning it has female and male flowers on separate trees. The female trees produce the cream-colored fruit. The fruit can be prepared and eaten, while also saving the kernel for the spice.

The delicate red aril/mace that surrounds the nutmeg seed can be dried and used as a spice and as medicine.

The oblong nutmeg seed is about the size of a peach pit, brown, and hard.

“Few cultivated plants are more beautiful than nutmeg-trees. They are handsomely shaped and glossy-leaved, growing to the height of twenty or thirty feet, and bearing small, yellowish flowers. The fruit is the size and colour of a peach, but rather oval. It is of a tough fleshy consistence, but when ripe splits open, and shows the dark brown nut within, covered with the crimson mace, and is then a most beautiful object.



Within the thin hard shell of the nut is the seed, which is the nutmeg of commerce. The nuts are eaten by the large pigeons of Banda, which digest the mace but cast up the nut with its seed uninjured."

Alfred Russel Wallace

December 1857, May 1859, April 1861

Plant Preparations

Walk into any grocery store and you will find nutmeg in the spice rack. While this nutmeg may give your pumpkin or apple pie a nice taste, this is a poor source for your medicinal nutmeg.

If you want the best quality nutmeg for medicine, then buy the whole nutmeg seed and grate it as needed. You can use a cheese grater for this or buy a micro-grater or a specialty nutmeg grater.

Once ground, nutmeg quickly loses its potency. I use my freshly ground nutmeg within a week of grating it.

In Chinese medicine, nutmeg is commonly roasted, which is said to reduce any toxicity.

Nutmeg is used in many sweet and savory dishes. It is traditionally consumed in warm milk to promote sleep.

"How about a delicious nighttime drink for the fall, made from ½ water and ½ milk, boiled with ginger, cardamom and nutmeg?"

Karta Purkh Singh Khalsa

Dosage suggestions:

- Nutmeg powder: 1-10 grams daily

Special Considerations

- Taking as much as 30 grams or 1 ounce of nutmeg can bring on uncomfortable symptoms, including vomiting, headache, and hallucinations.⁵ The last reported death from nutmeg poisoning was in 1908.⁶
- The *Botanical Safety Handbook* does not recommend going over 5 grams of nutmeg per day. This does not match my personal experience with this herb; I have recommended up to 10 grams of nutmeg for insomnia without ill effects (besides the much-needed sedation). But I do think it is wise to be cautious with large dosages unless working with an experienced practitioner. Taking over 6-10 grams of nutmeg will be a powerful sedative. If you do this during waking hours, you may feel extremely fatigued.
- Large doses of nutmeg are not recommended during pregnancy.
- Buy nutmeg from ethical sources who provide safe working environments.⁶



Citations

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Looking for Nutmeg?

It's important to get high quality nutmeg from ethical sources. I recommend searching for herbal apothecaries near you.

I also highly recommend Mountain Rose Herbs, an online apothecary that sells high quality organic herbs. They are my first choice for herbs I'm not able to find near me.





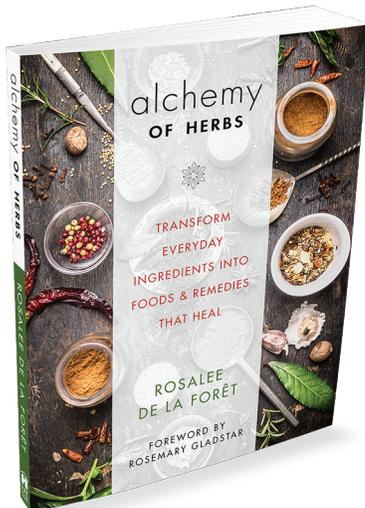
About Rosalee

Rosalee de la Forêt, is passionate about helping you explore the world of herbalism and nature connection. She is the Education Director at LearningHerbs, a registered herbalist with the American Herbalist Guild, and the author of the bestselling book *Alchemy of Herbs: Transform Everyday Ingredients into Foods and Remedies that Heal* as well as the online courses *The Taste of Herbs*, *Herbal Cold Care*, and *Apothecary: The Alchemy of Herbs Video Companion*.

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