

Ingredient of the Month

TARRAGON



Tarragon is a species of perennial herb in the sunflower family. It is widespread in the wild across much of Europe, Asia, and North America. There are many variations of the plant. One subspecies, French tarragon (*Artemisia dracunculus* var. *sativa*) is the most commonly used for culinary use because their leaves are most aromatic. Tarragon has a distinguishing aroma that is reminiscent of anise and vanilla. French tarragon leaves produces the same mouth-numbing sensation as with a Sichuan peppercorn.

Tarragon is a spring and summer herb. Tarragon grows around three feet in height with many slender branches. The leaves are long, green and glossy. While other subspecies of tarragon can produce flowers, French tarragon, however, seldom produces any flowers or seeds. As a result, it is not propagated by seed but instead by root division.

Tarragon is native to Siberia and western Asia. Tarragon is thought to have arrived in Europe in the late medieval period by Arab travelers. It was cultivated in North America after Thomas Jefferson set out on a quest to bring tarragon to Monticello. Finally, in 1806, he acquired his first roots from Irish-American horticulturalist Bernard McMahon in Philadelphia and became one of the earliest American distributors of tarragon.

For the ancient Romans and Greeks, tarragon was used more for its pain killing abilities than for its culinary appeal. It is the compound eugenol present in the oils extracted from tarragon that gives it a numbing property. Today, it is also used as an appetite stimulant and digestive tonic by naturalists. Tea made of tarragon is used in treatment of insomnia and hyperactivity. While a person will likely never eat enough tarragon in one sitting to have much of a nutritional impact, tarragon leaves are rich in iodine, mineral salts and vitamins A and C.

Culinary Uses

- Tarragon is the main flavoring component of Béarnaise sauce.
- Fresh sprigs of tarragon are steeped in vinegar to produce tarragon vinegar.
- Tarragon is used to flavor a carbonated soft drink, Tarkhuna. This drink is popular in countries such as, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan and the Ukraine.
- Tarragon is one of the main ingredients in Chakapuli, a popular Georgian stew.
- In Slovenia, tarragon is used in a variation of the traditional sweet nut roll, called potica.
- In Persian cuisine, tarragon is part of the sabzi knordan, a platter of fresh vegetables and herbs that is served alongside meals.

Selecting and Storing

- When purchasing tarragon, look for fresh leaves with no discoloration or wilting.
- Tarragon that has been stored for more than a few days will begin to lose its flavor.
- If you just need tarragon to last a day or two, store tarragon loosely wrapped in a plastic bag in the fridge.
- For longer storage, lay the stems on layers of paper towels, roll them up and store loosely wrapped in a plastic bag in the fridge, much like lettuce and other greens.
- Tarragon is also sold as a dried herb year-round and can easily be found in the spice aisle. However, as with most dried herbs, the flavor and texture will be diminished.

Interesting Facts

- The name tarragon in Arabic is “turkhum” which means dragon. The name is likely to have derived from its serpentine shaped roots or because it was used to treat bites and stings of venomous animals.
- Tarragon is one of the four fine herbs of French cooking along with chives, chervil, parsley and thyme.
- There is a legend which states that if a flax seed is placed into a radish root or sea onion and then planted to the ground, tarragon will grow from it.

