MUSTARD

Brassica nigra (Black mustard)

PLANT DESCRIPTION:
Black mustard is a field plant, not a garden herb. It grows in waste areas and grows thick-stemmed up to 12 feet tall, the average height being 6 feet. In some fertile areas it has grown as tall as 20 feet. There are 100 known species of mustard. Black mustard is common in the Northwest and starts blooming early in the spring. It is an annual herb, with toothed leaves, smaller on top. The flowers are bright yellow, 4-petaled, shaped like a cross. In the center of the blossom is a single green seed vessel which remains concealed until the petals and stamen fall off. Then it grows into a long (3/4 inch) pod, crammed with minute, dark, peppery seeds.

USES OF THE MUSTARD PLANT:

Medicinal: The seeds are among the most powerful caustic agents known. They contain two chemical compounds: myrosin and sinigrin. When mixed with water, the chemicals produce a volatile oil, a tiny drop of which may cause skin blisters or a burn.

The oil is the basis of the renowned mustard plaster that doctors in past generations prescribed and mothers had the task of applying for bad chest colds and bronchial conditions. This plaster consisted of a mixture of powdered mustard, flour and water spread between two soft pieces of cloth (such as flannel) which were placed on the chest. If the plaster was left on too long or the preparation was too strong, the skin blistered.

The plaster was effective because the oil is a counter-irritant, an agent that when applied externally to an internally inflamed area, causes blood vessels to dilate. So increased blood supply to the area carried away toxins.

Culinary: The seeds are also the flavoring in table mustard. I peeked at our French’s label to see if they used the real thing and it lists vinegar, water and the third ingredient is mustard seed. Dijon, however lists mustard seeds as the second ingredient. The seeds are also used as salad garnishes, seasonings, pickling spices, in sauces, etc.

Mustard’s name comes from these seeds, being a corruption of “must seeds” which goes back to Roman-occupied Britain where these were processed by soaking in grape juice (“must”) not yet fermented. (Angiers).
Mustard greens are a nutritious food, cooked or raw. Your supermarket often carries them. You should include them in your diet, if you don’t! 100 grams of them, boiled contain: 183 mg of calcium
30 mg phosphorus
3 mg iron
32 mg potassium
97 mg vitamin C
sturdy amounts of thiamine, riboflavin, niacin
7,000 i.u. of vitamin A

Mustard plants are also bird and animal feed. Birds like the seeds, ground squirrels too and deer eat the plants.

Mustard was an important plant of the Holy Land. The seeds were powdered or made into paste. The leaves were eaten as greens. Galilee in the spring is splashed with vivid yellow mustard groves. Travelers have reported riding through such groves when the plants towered over horse and rider and in which birds did actually build nests.

**Bibliography:** Zondervan’s Pictorial Bible Dictionary; Magic and Medicine of Plants (Readers Digest)