

Annato Seed Profile

Also known as

Bixa orellana, achiote, annata, beninoki, jarak belanda, kam tia, kangaram, kesumba, latka, roucou, sa ti, yan zhi shu, and yin ju shyu in various speciality markets.

Introduction

Annato is a South and Central American herb producing small, dark, red seeds with a faint, flowery odor. The tree was introduced to the Philippines during its Spanish period. In 1540, the Spanish mercenary Gonzalo Pizarro left the plunder of the Incan Empire on rumors that groves of cinnamon trees were to be found in the Amazon basin. Almost his entire force perished in the jungle. He escaped by sailing down the Amazon, his primary plunder the annatto berries he found instead of cinnamon.

Constituents

The intense red color of the seed is due to bixin in the seed coat. Annato also contains very high concentrations of carotenoids, chemicals in the same class as alpha- and beta-carotene.

Parts Used

The seed (in cooking) or the seed coat (for commercial food production).

Typical Preparations

Ground seeds or seed coats.

Summary

A newly discovered health benefit of annatto is its antioxidant properties that protect DNA from mutations induced by UV light, superoxides, or peroxides, hence its inclusion in skin care products. Annatto has been used for centuries to keep food from spoiling, and laboratory tests show that annatto extracts inhibit the growth of *Bacillus cereus*, *Clostridium perfringens*, and *Staphylococcus aureus*. One word of caution"don't add annatto to live cultures from kefir or yogurt if you want the beneficial bacteria.

Precautions

Allergies to annatto in the context of an organic, whole foods diet are unheard of. Sensitivities to all food colorants, including annatto, may occur if there is also sensitivity to BHA, BHT, and artificial red and yellow dyes.