

A matter of tastes

Coriander is an easy-to-grow annual herb of the plant, including seeds, roots and

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with distinctive flavour, and all parts stems, can be put to culinary use

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Over the years, I have found clearly divided opinions about using coriander – you either love it or hate it. I like it with food, but I dislike the scent, which has come from hand potting thousands of plants when it shot to fame in the UK, in the mid 1980s, when cook Delia Smith used it in a number of recipes.

It is an ancient herb that has been in cultivation for more than 3,000 years. There are records dating back from the 21st Egyptian Dynasty (around 1077–945BC) and many believe that the *manna* in the Old Testament is coriander seed: 'when the children of Israel were returning to their homeland from slavery in Egypt, they ate manna in the wilderness'. It is still one of the traditional bitter herbs to be eaten at Passover. Coriander was introduced to Northern Europe by the Romans, who combined the seeds with cumin seeds and vinegar to rub into meat as a preservative.

Known worldwide

Coriander (*Coriandrum sativum*) is grown throughout the world and it has many common names: Chinese parsley, yuen sai, pak chee, fragrant green, dhania (seed), dhania pattar and dhania sabz (leaves). It is a tender annual herb, and is related to carrots (members of the *Apiaceae* family).

The main medicinal use for coriander is to treat loss of appetite and dyspeptic complaints. It is good for the digestive system, reducing flatulence and stimulating the appetite by aiding the secretion of gastric juices. The roots are high in potassium and iron.

Growing to a height of 75cm (29½in) and a spread of 15cm (6in), coriander has pretty clusters of small white flowers

Other edible herbs that use the common name 'coriander'

❖ *Eryngium foetidum* (Caribbean coriander, cilantro, ketumbar): perennial; height 80cm (31½in); spread 60cm (24in). Small white flowers surrounded by two bracts in late summer. Pointed, aromatic, green/grey leaves arranged in rosettes.

❖ *Persicaria odorata* (Vietnamese coriander, Vietnamese mint) (pictured right): perennial; height 45cm (18in) and spread indefinite. Small creamy pink/white flowers in late summer. Pointed, aromatic leaves, with a brown V-shaped marking near base.



The roots of coriander can also be harvested for culinary use.



in summer, that are followed by delicious round seeds. The leaves come in two forms: the lower mid-green leaves are first to grow, and are broad with a strong scent (these are best for use in the kitchen); the second to grow are the upper leaves which are finely cut and have a more pungent scent. These finer leaves are a signal that the plant is going to run to flower and will need staking, so that the weight of the seeds does not snap the stems prior to harvest.

An aspect of the herb that is often overlooked is that the roots are edible – and are delicious. If you do not want to harvest the seeds it is well worth pulling the plant in late summer, so that you have the root, stem and leaf for use in the kitchen.

Growing tips

To grow coriander in your garden, choose a light soil that has been nourished with well-rotted manure or compost in the previous autumn, so that it will retain moisture in summer. This herb hates being transplanted, so sow it where you want to crop it. Position in light shade, not full sun. The seeds can be sown in spring, once frosts have passed and the soil has begun to warm. Sow the large seeds thinly, either direct into the garden or into a large, deep pot (in a small pot you will get hardly any leaf before it flowers). Sowing can be started earlier in the season if you are growing the herb in a glasshouse (either in a trough or large pot), but young plants will need protecting from the midday sun as they are prone to scorch. ●

Harvesting and uses

Leaves

Harvest: late spring until late summer, when leaves are bright green in colour, and before flowering starts. Alternatively, pull up the whole plant when it reaches 10cm (4in) high.

Culinary uses: add to dishes just before serving, as it tends to go slimy when cooked for too long and loses flavour. The leaves go well with salads, spicy dishes, salsas and vegetables, especially carrots, meat, chicken and fish.



Flowers

Harvest: pick the small white flowers when the whole cluster is in flower, from late spring until late summer. Harvest flowers as you intend to use them.

Culinary uses: ideal for use in salads or with rice, coriander flowers have a flavour that is a mixture of the seeds and the leaf – warm, aromatic and slightly scented.



Seeds

Harvest: seeds ripen suddenly in late summer and early autumn. Cut flower stems just as the smell of the seeds starts to change and become pleasant. Tie a paper bag over the seedheads and hang in a dry, warm, airy place for about 10 days. The seeds should come away from the husk easily.

Culinary uses: seeds have a hint of orange about the flavour, which is enhanced by heating in a dry pan before grinding. Stored in an airtight container they keep their flavour well – grind as required for use in curry pastes.



Roots

Harvest: before the plant runs to flower – from late spring (or once the plant reaches about 10cm (4in) high), until early autumn.

Culinary uses: root flavour is a combination of the leaf and seed with earthy undertones. Roots are most suited to being finely chopped and added to soups, stews, casseroles and curries, but also are often used in Thai recipes.



Grown in a trough, the leaves of coriander can be picked as required.

More from the RHS

The RHS Herb Advisory Group was formed in 2012 to co-ordinate the uses of herbs in horticulture and research. The group aim is to tie in initiatives involving herbs in physic, culinary, educational or commercial use. For more information email: barbara@bsegall.com