

Cinnamon and Cassia

Species name: Cinnamomum zeylanicum

Family: Luuraceae, laurel plants

Spicy part: Bark from young shoots

Origin: Ceylon, Western India (Malabar coast)

Cultivation: Sri Lanka, East and West Indies

Mauritius, Reunion, Southern India, Burma

Malaysia, Vietnam

Arabia has told tales of cinnamon as early as the fifth century B.C. In one story huge birds brought cinnamon sticks to their nests that were located so that no man could get to them. Arabs then killed a donkey or oxen, cut them into huge pieces and left the meat beneath the nests. The birds would struggle with the meat. When it was put into the nests they fell, and the Arabs then collected the cinnamon to sell. There are several other tales that try to explain why cinnamon and cassia were both so expensive.

Early Greeks thought that both cinnamon and cassia came from bushes that grew in Arabia. Ceylonese cinnamon is finer than the cassia that comes from China and India. In the United States they are so close in taste that the Food and Drug and Cosmetic Act does not try to separate them. In their unground state the two spices are easy to tell apart. Cinnamon bark is thick and yellowish brown but cassia is a little thicker and grayer. Also when genuine cinnamon is sold, its rolls or “quills” are usually telescoped into each other with the finest one on the outside.

We know that as early as 2800 B.C. the Chinese mention a plant known today as cassia. Queen Hatshepsut sent an expedition to today’s Yemen and returned with five ships carrying gold, ivory, incense and a load of cinnamon: all for the her palace at Thebes. The Phoenicians and Hebrews also know of cassia and cinnamon by 1000 B.C. In *Exodus* 30 the Lord directed Moses to make a holy ointment of olive oil, 500 units of myrrh and of cassia, half as much of sweet cinnamon and of calamus in order to anoint the sanctuary, its furnishings and the priests.

Throughout European history cinnamon and cassia have been so prized that battles for ownership of countries having it took place. One example is the Dutch and English who battled in the 1580s and Ceylon was one of the prizes. Portugal also was interested in the riches cinnamon could bring and Columbus hoped to find it as he traveled west. When the French conquered Holland, the English were thrilled and in 1795 they took Ceylon. The island then became part of the English territories. The English brought enough cinnamon home so that even the common folk could use it for cooking. Today Great Britain, Spain and the United States are the largest consumers of cinnamon.

Cinnamon, an evergreen, can become 15 meters tall in Sri Lanka but on plantations it is kept as a bush about 2.5 meters high. Its leaves are aromatic, shiny dark green on top and lighter on below. The flowers are tiny and yellowish, bunched on the branch tips. The trees need at least 100 inches of rain annually. In the past only wild cinnamon was gathered and birds were relied on to spread the seeds. Today when a plant is three years

old, it is cut back, forming 6-8 good shoots per bush. Two years later, these are a couple of meters long and can be harvested during the rainy season. The bark is loosened with a special knife and left to rot for a day. Then the outer layer is easily scraped off exposing the fine light inner bark. This is dried, first in the shade and finally in the sun for 3-5 days. The rolls are telescoped to make meter-long quills that are sorted according to quality. A seven-year-old plantation is expected to yield 135 pounds per acre. Cassia is a larger plant; but the process is almost the same except that the outer bark does not have to be scraped off.



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