Turmeric

Curcuma longa

Turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) is such a remarkable plant. It is used in culinary, medicinal and religious practices, for beauty treatments and as a dye. It is now so widespread that it is impossible to determine its place of origin, although this is believed to be in south-eastern Asia where it still grows wild in forests today.

Turmeric is a close relation of galangal and ginger and a member of the ginger family (Zingiberaceae). Like ginger, it is an herbaceous perennial with well-developed bright orange rhizomes (stems below ground). Plants require warm temperatures and high rainfall. There are 100 or more *Curcuma* species, mostly natives of south-east Asia, India, China, New Guinea and we even have one species, *Curcuma australasica* that occurs in northern Australia. Many species grown as ornamentals have become naturalized in various parts of the world.

Turmeric may have been used for 6000 years or more. In 1280, Marco Polo who encountered Turmeric on his travels to China across the Silk Road, described '*a vegetable with the properties of saffron, yet it is not really saffron*'. Rhizomes are used fresh or dried and ground to produce a powder. Leaves and young shoots are used to wrap and impart flavour to cooked or steamed foods.

Turmeric is a staple of almost every curry and is also used to flavour and colour rice, lentil

and yoghurt dishes. India produces most of the world supply and almost 80% of that production is consumed in India. Fresh Turmeric is preferred in India, but dried and powdered commonly used elsewhere.

Curcumin is the best known of the *curcuminoids*, chemical components of turmeric which comprise about 3% of the powdered spice. Curcumin is a diarylheptanoid, a secondary metabolite (secondary metabolites are organic compounds often used as food flavours and medicines).

There seems to be a never ending list of ailments for which Turmeric is recommended: antioxidant, anti-depressant, anti-inflammatory as well as an antibiotic, a chemotherapeutic and even an agent that acts on the symptoms of Alzheimer's Disease. The complex biochemistry of Turmeric promises to yield more important discoveries; it is yet another priceless natural plant product with great prospects for improvement of human health.

Additional references:

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Australian Native Turmeric, *Curcuma australasica*
Photo: John Hill:

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ANative_tumeric.jpg

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