

# Pepper: The World's Most Popular Spice

There are so many different kinds of pepper out there, from the more common black and white peppers to the rarer long pepper, and a few spices that aren't even pepper at all. The wrinkled little peppercorn has played a big role in the history of food.

It is the world's most important spice, due to its near-worldwide popularity and the effect meeting its demand had on global trade and exploration. It has long been thought to contain healing qualities—Sanskrit medical volumes dating back more than 3,000 years include advice on how to administer it. By the fifth century, pepper was so wildly valuable it was used to pay off taxes and levies in place of currency; rent and dowries were sometimes paid in pepper; and when Rome was besieged by the Visigoths in 408 CE, 3,000 pounds of peppercorns were included in the ransom paid for the city's release. At its most valuable, pepper was worth its weight in gold.

All through the ancient world and into Europe's Middle Ages, pepper appears to have been universally beloved, as prized in India as it was in northern Europe, as eagerly traded in the ports of Venice as it was in the ports of Egypt. And while the world's consumption of pepper was enormous then, it is, naturally, even more enormous now: It accounts for about one-fifth of the world's spice trade today.

Pungent, earthy, hot, woody the word “pepper” is used to describe dozens of different types and varieties that come in a medley of colors, a spectrum of grades, and a range of qualities. It is even used for imitators that are not pepper at all.

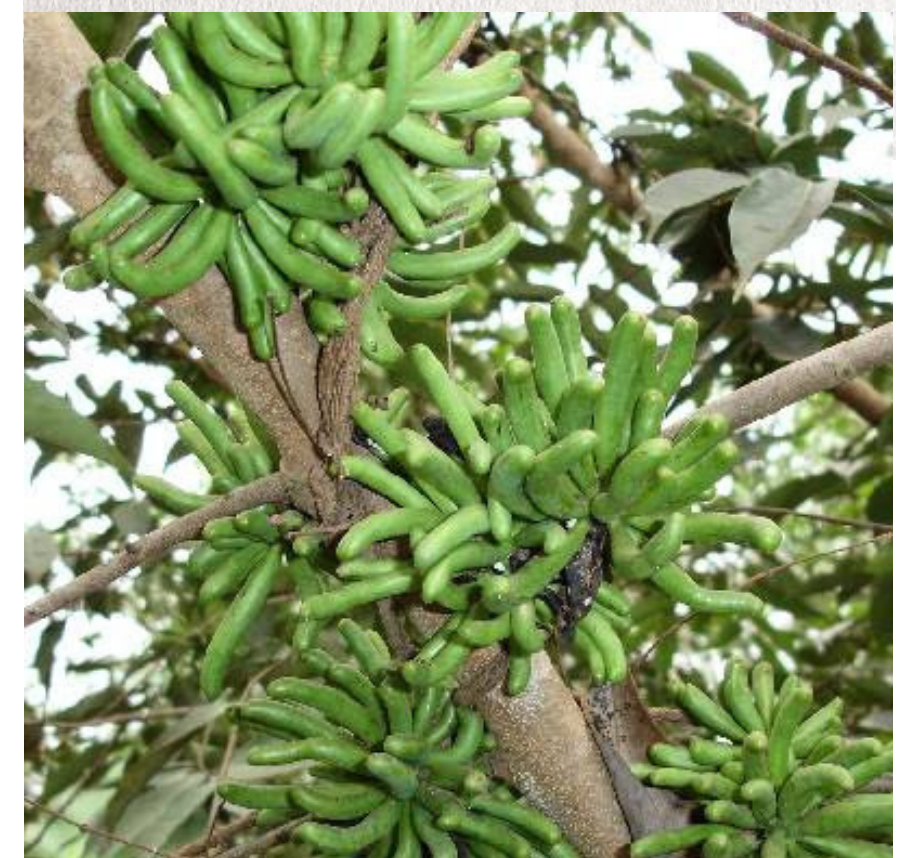


# Today's Pepper – the Senegal Pepper

*Xylopia aethiopica* is an evergreen, aromatic tree, of the Annonaceae family that can grow up to 20m high. It is a native to the lowland rainforest and moist fringe forests in the savanna zones of Africa. The dried seeds have a musky flavor and are used as a spice in a manner similar to black pepper, and as a flavouring agent that defines café Touba, the dominant style of coffee in Senegal. It is also known as Kani pepper, Senegal pepper, Ethiopian pepper, and (historically) Moor pepper and Negro pepper. It is sometimes referred to as African pepper or Guinea pepper, but these are ambiguous terms that may refer to Ashanti pepper and grains of paradise, among others.

An infusion of the plant's bark or fruit has been useful in the treatment of bronchitis and dysenteric conditions, or as a mouthwash to treat toothaches. It has also been used as a medicine for biliousness and fever. The bark, when steeped in palm wine, is used to treat asthma, stomach-aches and rheumatism.

In the Middle Ages the fruit was exported to Europe as a 'pepper.' In the eastern part of Nigeria, the plant's fruit is an essential ingredient in preparation of local soups to aid new mothers in breastfeeding. It remains an important item of local trade throughout Africa as a spice, and flavouring for food and for medicine.



Grains of Selim  
*Xylopia aethiopica*

