



Canada



Coriander: A Mediterranean Native

Coriandrum sativum, a plant of the family of *Umbelliferae* (Apiacées) like parsley or celery, is widely used in the kitchen for its leaves and stems but also for its fruits which are commonly mistaken with the seeds. Coriander is indigenous from South Europe and the Mediterranean region and has a long history in Middle Eastern kitchens dating back to the Bronze Age.

In Gary Allen's *Herbs: A Global History* from the Edible Series published by Reaktion Books, he explains "clay tablets aged 3500 years ago in Mycenaean Greece" and mentions herbs in use at the time like celery, coriander, fennel and mint. Yet, the use of these herbs whether for cooking, medicine or perfume is still unknown.

In the very well documented book *The Oxford Companion to Food*, we learn that the word coriander is indeed derived from the Greek word "koris" meaning bedbugs. In fact, the foliage of the plant and the unripe fruits have an odor that has been described as the smell of "bug-infested bedclothes."

According to the Greek philosopher Theophrastus (372-287 B.C.), the ancient Egyptians used many herbs including coriander referring to its foliage as "okhlion." It's reported that a basket of coriander seeds was placed in Tutankhamun's tomb for his journey to the afterlife. Hence for centuries, the reputation of Egyptian coriander remained.

In his cookbook *Kitab al-Tabikh*, Mohamed bin Hassan al-Baghdadi outlined the herbs and spices used in the 13th century Iraqi cuisine. The book is a testament to the established role of spices in the Arab world of the Middle East, including spices like saffron, coriander, cumin, ginger, cardamom, nutmeg, pepper, cinnamon and cloves. The coriander fruits were largely used even more than the leaves, which are referred to as "cilantro" in North America and Spanish speaking countries.

In Lebanon, we tend to think of "coriander" as another type of spices, a seasoning for foods like falafel, pickles, baked potatoes and many other traditional dishes. Coriander leaves are commonly accompanied with garlic and used to season chicken and fish. In the Arab world, coriander leaves are used in salads, tajine, in a sauce for fried fish in Egypt or as the main ingredient in the chermoula marinade in North Africa.

Coriander is particularly adapted for our climate and can be easily grown in your garden or balcony. Seeds are directly sown into the ground during April at altitudes between 850-1,000m, and earlier on lower altitudes. The first cut is done two months later. Being an annual crop, coriander plants serve one growing season and should be reseeded for the next season.

Overall, coriander plays a particularly important role in maintaining or increasing dietary diversity. It has numerous health benefits and is an important source of vitamins and minerals such as vitamin A, K, C, folate and iron. Coriander is well known for its antioxidant and antimicrobial benefits that strengthen the immune system. Seasoning food with coriander instead of salt can be a healthier alternative for people with hypertension.



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Since coriander leaves wilt quite quickly once they are harvested or bought, it's customary in Lebanon to coarsely chop and freeze it, which helps preserve it up to one year. Leaves can be easily dried in a shady place for three days for later use for seasoning or for a marinade.

The selling price of coriander is considered to be relatively higher than mint and parsley reaching 2,000 LBP per bundle during winter and 1,500 LBP during summer season. Prices are also linked to market demand. For instance during the month of Ramadan, prices can increase up to 100%¹. Although there is a limit on the production of fresh coriander in the Lebanese market, the potential for the production of coriander seeds is high.

Since women are the fastest growing group of new farmers, empowering and training them on coriander production and developing their capacities to grow, process and market this crop is an opportunity to increase their livelihoods, especially since the crop holds high marketing potentials. A versatile cash crop with a simple production process coriander is popular amongst rural communities and can provide economic participation opportunities for women who belong to different socio-economic statuses. Its processing techniques can be adapted to different capacities, varying from low-cost sun drying techniques to the use of high-tech driers. The average time it takes to harvest coriander is between 6 to 8 weeks and the seed production process takes around 100 days which allows women to profit from several cuts per season.

Agricultural Tips:

- Best months to grow coriander are June to July and October to November.
- Make sure you have a constant supply of coriander leaves through the season, sow small amounts every 3 weeks.
- Prepare the soil by adding manure or compost.
- Make sure the soil surface is fine, remove soil lumps and gravels.
- Soil should be well drained.
- Sow seeds in groups of 5 with 20 cm between rows and 20 cm between plants at a depth of 5 mm.
- The seeds start germinating in about 2-3 weeks.
- Gently spray with water immediately after sowing, then on the second and third day water subsequently at 6 to 10 day intervals after checking the soil humidity.

¹ ILO Regional Office for Arab States. 2015. Potatoes and leafy green vegetables: value chain analysis (Akkar, Lebanon).