

10 Facts about Spices

1. What is the most expensive spice in the world?
2. Who discovered how to hand pollinate a vanilla flower?
3. How many types of peppercorn are there?
4. Which spice was used to make Wrigley's chewing gum because of its minty taste?
5. What plant does mace come from?
6. What spice is good for relieving tooth ache?
7. Why did Cadbury's choose the colour purple for their logo colour?
8. How many spices are combined to make allspice?
9. Which spice is good for curing insomnia?
10. Which spice is good for alleviating all sorts of stomach sickness.

1. Saffron - harvested from crocus flowers and often referred to as "red gold," for good reason—it retails at around 320 rupees for a single gram in India but exports will be sold for as much as 5 times that amount. Crocuses do not thrive in Kerala - they prefer it up North.
2. A spice that does grow in Kerala is vanilla - the second most expensive spice in the world. A member of the orchid family, its flower has a very deep throat that only hummingbirds can reach. Hummingbirds do not thrive in Kerala, but thanks to a 12 year old slave boy called **Edmond Albius**, a method of hand pollinating the vanilla flower was discovered in 1841. Edmond was shown how to pollinate a watermelon plant by his plantation owner and applied the same principles to the vanilla orchid. His discovery of artificial pollination led to development of a mass scale billion dollar industry and his technique is still used today. Sadly, Edmond received no reward and died in poverty.
3. There are 4 types of peppercorn - but they all from the same flowering vine that twines itself high up into the trunks of trees. Black peppercorns used the world over need no introduction. White peppercorns are black peppercorns which have been soaked in water to enable the outer skin to be removed. They have a more intense flavour than black peppercorns, and are often used in delicate dishes such as white sauces, soufflés and mashed potatoes. **Green peppercorns** are unripe black peppercorns which are dried to produce a mild flavour. They are wonderful in creamy peppercorn steak sauces. **Red peppercorns** are the rarest and most expensive on the market. They are black peppercorns that have been allowed to ripen fully on the bush rather than being harvested for use as black/white pepper. If they are left for long enough, they turn red and these delicate berries produce a sweetly spiced flavour. **Pink peppercorns** are milder and sweeter than black peppercorns, but are from a shrub from a different family altogether and not at all the same as red peppercorns. So now - you know! You may also be interested to know that peppers are pollinated during the monsoon rain season making them the perfect crop for Kerala. The seeds can be exported, but the monsoon season belongs to God's Own Country!

4. Cardamom is nature's breath freshener. Its minty taste made it the perfect ingredient for Wrigley's Orbit chewing gum.
5. Mace is the red coating that surrounds the nutmeg seed. It has a more piquant flavour than nutmeg and a peppery/lemony taste that takes you full speed ahead to Christmas.
6. Cloves contain eugenol, which acts as a natural anaesthetic and antibacterial agent. A clove sucked or chewed near the sore area - or an application of clove oil - can temporarily relieve toothache.
7. You might think that Cadbury's chose purple because that is the colour of the flesh around the cocoa seed after all the sticky sweet white pulp has been removed. You would be wrong though! Cadbury's were given a royal warrant to manufacture chocolate for Queen Victoria and chose purple for their brand colour because it was the monarch's favourite colour.
8. This is a trick question! Allspice is the berry of the allspice tree and not a combination of spices. The strongly aromatic berries combine the flavours and aromas of Cloves, Pepper, Cinnamon & Nutmeg. This smell transports me straight back to Christmas Eve, when the preparation of our family favourite red cabbage recipe begins.
9. Nutmeg is said to be good for relieving insomnia because it contains compounds like myristicin and elemicin that have sedative effects. A pinch of nutmeg infused in warm milk half an hour before sleeping can help you sleep. Nutmeg tea can also help to relax you. Only use a small pinch though - it can be toxic in large quantities and you don't want to sleep for longer than you had anticipated - or never wake up!
10. Ginger. Chewing on a delicious piece of crystallised ginger could save you from feeling nauseous on a long journey. I bought a small bag at one of the many spice shops in Thekkady and found that it worked a treat on the four and a half hour journey on winding roads to Kumarakom.