

## Bell County Master Gardeners

### Tip of the Week

By Candace Mullen

#### “The Uses of Turmeric”

A relative of ginger, turmeric is a perennial plant that grows 5 - 6 feet high in the tropical regions of Southern Asia, with trumpet-shaped, dull yellow flowers. Its roots are bulbs that also produce rhizomes, which then produce stems and roots for new plants. It is usually available ground, as a bright yellow, fine powder. The whole turmeric is a tuberous rhizome, with a rough, segmented skin. It is yellowish-brown with a dull orange interior that looks bright yellow when powdered. Turmeric is fragrant and has a bitter, somewhat sharp taste. Although it grows in many tropical locations, the majority of turmeric is grown in India, where it is used as a main ingredient in curry. The name derives from the Latin terra merita “meritorious earth” referring to the color of ground turmeric resembling a mineral pigment. In many languages turmeric is simply named as “yellow root”. Although Central Texas isn't its home, many of us use it extensively, if unknowingly.

The roots, or rhizomes and bulbs, are used in medicinal and food preparations. Turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) has been used for 4,000 years to treat a variety of ailments. Curcumin, the active ingredient, has antioxidant properties, which some claim may be as strong as vitamins C and E. Other substances in this herb have antioxidant properties as well.

Turmeric is an ancient spice, a native of South East Asia, used from antiquity as dye and a condiment. It is cultivated primarily in Bengal, China, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, Java. Peru. Australia and the West Indies. It is still used in rituals of the Hindu religion, and as a dye for holy robes, being natural, unsynthesized, and cheap. Turmeric is in fact one of the cheapest spices. Although as a dye it is used similarly to saffron, the culinary uses of the two spices should not be confused and should never replace saffron in food dishes. Turmeric's use dates back nearly 4000 years, to the Vedic culture in India where it was used as a culinary spice and had some religious significance.

In recipes outside South Asia, turmeric is sometimes used as an agent to impart a rich, custard-like yellow color. It is used in canned beverages and baked products, dairy products, ice cream, yogurt, yellow cakes, orange juice, biscuits, popcorn color, sweets, cake icings, cereals, sauces, gelatins, etc. It is a significant ingredient in most commercial curry powders. Turmeric is mostly used in savory dishes, as well as some sweet dishes, such as the cake sfouf. Turmeric has been used to color cheeses, yogurt, dry mixes, salad dressings, winter butter and margarine. Turmeric is also used to give a yellow color to some prepared mustards, canned chicken broths and other foods (often as a much cheaper replacement for saffron).

Turmeric also has many medicinal properties and many in South Asia use it as a readily available antiseptic for cuts, burns and bruises. It is also used as an antibacterial agent. It is taken in some Asian countries as a dietary supplement, which allegedly helps with stomach problems and other ailments. It is also popular as a tea in Okinawa, Japan. After making pickles this summer, I wanted to know more about this herb; now you know the rest of the story!

Don't Forget the 2011 Master Gardener fall plant sale and free seminars on Oct 1 from 7:30 AM to 1PM. Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact [ask.bcmga@gmail.com](mailto:ask.bcmga@gmail.com)