

Turmeric



Turmeric (*Curcuma longa L.*) is native to southern India and Indonesia and has been used for over five centuries not only as a spice but also as a food or fabric dye and is known for its medicinal properties as an anti-inflammatory and antiseptic. Initially brought to Europe by Arab traders in the thirteenth century, the spice has found increasing popularity outside of India where it is used in many traditional Asian dishes and as a primary ingredient in curry powder.

Turmeric is a close relative of ginger and a member of the Zingiberaceae family along with cardamom and galangal. The plant's rhizome is used fresh, as well as dried and ground. Its leaves can be used as a wrap as one might use grape, banana, or cabbage leaves. The spice imparts both a slightly bitter, nutty taste with an orange tint. About 97 percent of the world's turmeric is produced in India.

References: Florida Gulf Coast University, University of Florida/IFAS Extension, University of Illinois Extension, USDA.

SEASONAL AVAILABILITY

LOCATION	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
INDIA	●	●	●	●	●							
PACIFIC ISLANDS	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
THAILAND	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●

Reference: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

TYPES, VARIETIES & CUTS

While upwards of 50 cultivars of turmeric exist, the two most common are Madras and Alleppey. While some types are known by trade names based on attributes like thickness, color, smell, and hardness, varieties from India are named for their production region. Alleppey is preferred in the United States for its use as a spice and food coloring. Alleppey has a higher volatile oil and curcumin content than Madras. Madras is preferred in Britain and the Middle East for its brighter, intense light yellow color that is often used in curry and mustard paste.



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TYPES, VARIETIES & CUTS—CONTINUED

Dried turmeric is generally imported as whole-rhizome fingers, bulbs, or splits. Good quality turmeric is clean with smooth skin and a uniform flesh and skin color. When broken, the rhizome should make a “metallic twang” or clean snapping sound.

Fingers are secondary branches that grow off of the ‘mother’ rhizome and measure about 1 to 3 inches long and less than 1 inch wide. Splits are bulbs that have been cut in half or quartered before curing. Rhizomes are then processed into powder or oleoresin within the importing country.

References: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Tamil Nadu Agricultural University.

PESTS & DISEASE

While there are few pests and diseases that affect turmeric, the most serious pest is the *shoot borer*. Other pests of concern include *thrips*, *rhizome scales*, and *nematodes*. The few diseases to which turmeric is susceptible include *rhizome rot*, *leaf spot*, and *leaf blotch*.

References: Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, USDA.

CULTIVATION, STORAGE & PACKAGING

Preharvest:

Turmeric thrives at temperatures from 68 to 86°F and does best at higher humidity. Soil should be warm, well drained, and fertile with direct or indirect sunlight. Turmeric plants are perennials that can be planted in late spring in subtropical climates. Planting season depends on the variety, but turmeric will thrive throughout the year in the tropics.

Fresh turmeric roots are planted in single rows or on flat beds in a broad ridge system. Single rows should be spaced 18 inches apart with 6 inches between plants at a depth of 1.5 inches. Broad ridges are used for areas with poor drainage or heavy rainfall, and have drip irrigation. Seedlings emerge about 2 to 4 weeks after planting.

Turmeric grows to about 3 feet high in subtropical climates to 5 or 6 feet high in the tropics. Plants bloom with white to dull yellow trumpet-shaped flowers. Leaves are dark green, oblong, and about 5 inches wide. Roots are bulbs that produce rhizomes that sprout the stems and roots of new plants. Rhizomes can be harvested about 7 to 10 months after planting. Harvest readiness is indicated when bottom leaves turn yellow and stems become dry, indicating dormancy. In subtropical climates, plants return reliably in the spring.

Turmeric is harvested by carefully digging the rhizome bunches out of the soil. The entire plant is generally dug up with some rhizomes sent to market and some saved for the next year’s planting.

Postharvest:

Harvested rhizomes are soaked in water to remove excess dirt. Mother rhizomes are usually saved for planting and stored in well-ventilated rooms, covered with dry leaves to prevent both rot and dehydration. For rhizomes going to market, long roots and leaf scales are removed before curing.

Rhizomes are cured 2 to 3 days after harvest by sorting them into batches of roughly equal sizes and boiling until soft enough to yield to finger pressure or be pierced. Steam boiling can be an alternative to immersion. Cured rhizomes dry faster than uncured and are less wrinkled and easier to polish.

Cured fingers or bulbs are dried to about 5 to 10% moisture level either via sun or mechanical drying. Mechanical drying is considered ideal as rhizomes are sensitive to light and moisture. Drying temperature is about 140°F. After drying, rhizomes are sorted into grades of fingers, bulbs, and splits before polishing to improve their rough appearance. Polishing consists of mechanical rubbing, sometimes with a mixture of turmeric powder and water sprinkled in during the last phase.

References: Florida Gulf Coast University, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, University of Florida/IFAS Extension, University of Maryland Medical Center.