

# Did You Know?

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## Sesame – *Sesamum indicum*

- The plant that produces the sesame seed is an annual broadleaf plant that grows 5-6' tall with bell shaped tubular flowers resembling foxglove flowers, that form pods at the leaf axil (where the stem and leaf meet).
- The plant is cultivated for its edible seeds and is known to be one of the oldest oilseed crops.
- It is grown for nutritional purposes, medicinal properties, and industrial uses.
- It has been cultivated for thousands of years all over the world, including Africa, East Indies, China and India. It was cultivated for oil in 3000 BC.
- The seeds were used by Egyptian physicians for medicine, Babylonian women to preserve youth and beauty and Roman soldiers' strength and energy.
- Baskets of sesame were found in King Tutankhamen's tomb indicates its presence in Egypt by 1350 BCE. Other archaeological remains date sesame to about 3500 to 3050 BCE.
- Brought to the United States by enslaved Africans, who called them benné seeds. Eating sesame seeds was thought to bring good luck. Middle Easterners also referred to sesame as benne.
- Sesame was reportedly grown by Thomas Jefferson in test plots at Monticello.
- The seeds are used to top baked goods, milled into flour, crushed into a paste (tahini), pressed to produce oil, and used in sweet and savory dishes all over the world.
- The saying "Open Sesame!" from *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, likely comes from the fact that with the slightest touch, the sesame seed pods burst open and scatter the seeds.
- The writers of the children's show *Sesame Street* selected the word "sesame" from the fabled command "Open Sesame!" in *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* to suggest excitement and adventure for the title of the show.
- Various sesame seed varieties produce seed colors that are black, gray, red, and off-white to tan. The lighter colored seeds tend to be more commonly produced in Europe, the Americas, West Asia and the Indian subcontinent. The darker colored seeds are more commonly produced in China and Southeast Asia.

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- Plant seeds when soil has warmed to approximately 80°F in areas that receive 90-150 frost-free days.
- Harvest as seeds ripen, dry and store out of direct light or in the freezer.
- In the US, commercial production ramped up in the 1950's following the development of modern cultivars with seed pods that don't open when ripe, enabling mechanical harvest.
- Sesame seeds are approximately 50% oil and 25% protein.
- Sesame seeds are high in Vitamin A, Thiamine, Riboflavin, Niacin, iron, other minerals, and fiber. In addition, antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and other studied effects have shown human health benefits.
- Sesamin and sesamolin, which belong to a special beneficial fiber group called lignans are found in the seeds. These are known to have cholesterol lowering effects, help to prevent high blood pressure and may even protect the liver from free radical damage.