

November's Spice is: Juniper Berry

Plant:

Juniperus communis: A member of the cypress family that is found across the northern hemisphere. Trees are dioecious, meaning they must have a male tree and a female tree in close proximity to produce fruit. Berries, which are actually seed cones, ripen every 2-3 years, but at different rates. When harvesting, only take the berries that are blue in color, as they are the ripe ones.

History:

Juniper's medicinal uses have been noted as far back as ancient Egypt, where it was believed to treat tapeworm. In early Greece, Dioscorides wrote of many uses, including as a contraceptive. By the Middle Ages juniper berries were used to cure all kinds of ailments including gas pains, cough, consumption pains, ruptures, cramps, and convulsions. Juniper berries were included in the mix of pungent herbs used in plague masks and the boughs were used to sweeten sick rooms across Europe. There is even an Eastern European folk cure for hangover that says if you chew 3 berries before drinking you will not have a hangover.

Indigenous Americans used juniper berries to aid indigestion, and treat colds. They were also used as spiritual protection from evil spirits and diseases.

Uses:

Juniper berries have diuretic and antiseptic properties. This make them great for treating urinary infections. They also contain anti-inflammatory and pain relieving compounds making them beneficial to people with muscle aches, joint pains, and arthritis.

In cooking juniper berries are characterized by their bitter, peppery taste. They are used instead of pepper when cooking game such as venison and pheasant. The most famous use of juniper berries is Gin. Gin was invented in the 17th century as a medicinal drink with the same diuretic properties of juniper berry oil.