

# Methi in our madness

Fenugreek (or methi) is another one of those crops with many talents: a leafy green, a herb, a green manure, a seed spice, a coffee substitute – even supposedly a cure for baldness!

Fenugreek is one of the legume family, and the plant looks slightly similar to lucerne or alfalfa. We have discovered that there are actually two types of fenugreek and we will discuss the far more widely grown, common methi (*Trigonella foenum-graecum*) first. The name 'foenum-graecum' literally means 'Greek hay'. This name derives from the somewhat unscrupulous practice developed by Greek merchants of using fenugreek to disguise the smell of mouldy hay so that it could still be sold to feed horses. Fenugreek is amongst the easiest things to grow. Once the soil is warm (April to May, depending on where you are), sow the seeds directly into a moderately fertile, free-draining soil at a rate of 25 kg/ha. Drilling in lines of about 25cm spacing will aid mechanical weeding, which will only have to be done once, because this is a fast-growing, vigorous crop. It shouldn't need too much looking after, and can be cut in six to eight weeks, depending on the time of year. Fenugreek is sold in bunches on a stalk about 20-25 cm long, and should be harvested before it flowers, since this decreases its quality and value. Bunches of fresh methi are ubiquitous in Asian shops around the country. It is used as a saag (the Hindi name for any leafy green, so can also refer to spinach or mustard too), and once cooked tastes like spinach with a mild, slightly bitter curry taste. The leaves can also be dried and this intensifies the flavour, so that it is used as a herb for flavouring.



Once cut, the common methi will not grow back, and needs resowing. It can be sown any time until mid-August; fenugreek is produced commercially in the UK up until the end of October, when production turns to warmer countries, particularly Cyprus. It is also possible to grow fenugreek to produce seed. This process will take at least three to four months for the seeds to reach the dry stage in their pods. I don't know of growers currently producing fenugreek seed commercially in the UK, but I may stand corrected.

The seeds are a few millimetres in size, with a blocky shape and a characteristic curry smell. Once ground, they are an essential component of curry powder, but should be used sparingly, otherwise the bitter taste is too pervasive. In times of desperation, it can be roasted and used as a coffee substitute, although I am not too keen on the idea of a curry espresso.

One of the other major potentials of fenugreek is as a green manure. It is certainly one of the most rapid to establish, which make it a tempting proposition for a rapid break crop; but a few things should be kept in mind. Firstly, fenugreek, although a legume, will not reliably fix nitrogen in UK soils. This is because the nitrogen-fixing bacteria *Rhizobium meliloti* are not always present in our soils. If you want to make sure it will fix nitrogen, it is best to inoculate the seed shortly before planting with one of the commercial strains of inoculum. However, in our experience, we have noticed quite a few instances of fenugreek forming nitrogen-fixing nodules on its roots (they should look bright red), even when we haven't inoculated. A history of growing fenugreek on the site before may contribute to this, but we are not completely sure of all the factors. The second point to bear in mind is that it won't grow back after cutting. This is not necessarily a drawback. Although cutting back is used to control weeds in many green manures, fenugreek is so rapid to establish, that, in most instances it won't be necessary. Beware of grazing dairy animals on this crop as it will give their milk a curry taste – good in raita, not so good in tea.

We mentioned at the beginning that there are two types of fenugreek. More recently on our travels, we have discovered a slightly different type of fenugreek grown by Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities. It is commonly known as 'Kasoori methi' and is prized within these communities as having a superior quality as a herb for flavouring. After much deliberation and consultation with Kew Gardens, we are now pretty sure that it is *Trigonella corniculatum*. This species has slightly smaller serrated leaves and bright yellow flowers. Although slower to establish, it does have the advantages of much better cold tolerance, and that it grows back vigorously after cutting. There may be a niche market for this particular herb as it doesn't seem to be so widely available as the common methi.

I did mention baldness at the beginning, so perhaps I had better touch on this subject. From what I can see, there are various treatments ranging from taking capsules to grinding seeds into a paste then applying to the offending region. Not something I have tried myself, but the Daily Mail seems to think that it may work...

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