

Flora & Fauna in Spain

The Carob

Our very own chocolate tree!

The carob, (*Ceratonia siliqua*), or locust bean, is a sturdy evergreen tree native to the Mediterranean region and belonging to the pea family. It is a drought resistant species, intolerant of water-logging, but adapts well to a variety of soil conditions including salty coastal areas. Known as algarrobo in Spain it is grown extensively for agricultural purposes.

The tree blossoms in autumn with flowers that are small and numerous and hang in catkin like clusters. Pollination occurs by wind and insects.

The fruit is a seed pod, which is long and flat, turning from light green to dark brown as it ripens. It actually takes a tree around 15 years before it bears fruit but then can yield up to a ton of pods in a year.

Humans have been eating the pods for over 5000 years. When dried or roasted they have a slightly sweet taste resembling chocolate and were an important source of sugar before sugarcane and sugar beet became widely available. They are used in powder or chip form as a substitute for chocolate in cooking, especially chocolate spread. It is widely available in health food shops in various forms.



The seeds are also processed and are mainly turned into locust bean gum, which is used as gelling agent, stabiliser or emulsifier in products such as ice-cream.

Carob juice is a traditional drink during the Islamic month of Ramadan and the dried fruit is often eaten on the Jewish festival of Tu Bishvat. In Egypt the pods are consumed as a snack. Ancient Egyptians used the gummy properties of carob seed by using it as an adhesive in binding mummies and the pods and seeds have been found in Egyptian tombs. The Romans are said to have eaten the pods when green and fresh for their natural sweetness.

Why Eat Carob?

Carob has several advantages over chocolate. For example, it does not contain oxalic acid, or the stimulants, caffeine and theobromine, which are present in chocolate, nor does it contain the substances that can cause migraines in susceptible people. Also chocolate is high in fat and when purchased in bar form in sugar too. Whereas carob powder is virtually fat free and high in calcium. It is also worth bearing in mind that cacao trees require frequent spraying with toxic chemicals because pests and fungi readily attack them, whereas carob trees do not. It is for these reasons that it is



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much better to use carob powder instead of chocolate/cocoa powder, in recipes, whenever possible.

Did you know....

The term 'carat', the unit by which diamond weight is measured and the purity of gold is realised is derived from the Greek word *kerátion*, alluding to an ancient practice when these and other precious minerals and stones were weighed against the seeds of the carob tree. The system was eventually standardised and one carat is equal to 0.2 grams.

The plant is also known as St John's Bread because according to some Christians John the Baptist lived on them in the wilderness.