Licorice... for flavour, health benefits and crop potential

As we have been growing licorice on our Herb Farm at Nambour, Sunshine Coast, Queensland for over 25 years, people often ask, is it easy to grow and what are its uses.

It certainly is easy to grow, if you are the type of farmer who just likes to watch a crop that requires little maintenance. This perennial legume to 1 metre high, develops a strong root system, and it is the woody spreading roots 1-5cm thick, that give us licorice flavouring and also many therapeutic uses. Licorice will grow in temperate, warm and sub-tropical climates; and also in tropical areas provided the soil is free draining, during wet humid weather. If plants are mulched thickly, to deter weeds and retain moisture, very little attention is necessary once plants are established. As plants goes dormant in winter, they are not affected by frosts.

Seeds planted spring and summer can be started in pots or seedling trays, and planted in the field when 10-20cm high. Germination of seed may be spasmodic, from 2 weeks to 12 months or more. Propagation by root pieces 20-30cm long, planted spring, summer, autumn at 60-100 cm spacing, is the quickest way to establish a crop. Once roots or seedlings have settled in, plants require little maintenance and generally thrive in extremely dry conditions. A rich friable soil will encourage fast growth of roots with new stems emerging along the spreading horizontal roots, which is an indication that the licorice is developing. Roots may be of “finger-thickness” size in 2-3 years and can be dug at any time of the year.

The multiplex chemistry of licorice gives it a wide-spectrum of properties, infact, over 600 constituents have been identified in the plant; no wonder it is a plant with many actions: expectorant, alterative, pectoral, diuretic, emollient, antioxidant, antifungal, cathartic, stomachic, antiviral, laxative, antispasmodic, antihistaminic, antibacterial, oestrogenic, anti-inflammatory, and tonic... to name a few.

Licorice contains a unique substance called glycyrrhizin, by analysis found to be 50 times sweeter than refined sugar. It is detectable if only one drop is added to 15,000 drops of pure water. The glycyrrhizin has no kilojoules, but the natural licorice root (from which the glycyrrhizin comes) does contain a few kilojoules due to the presence of a very small amount of dextrose (1.4%) and sucrose (3.2%). Due to its sweetness and flavouring properties, it has been used to make bitter medicines more palatable. It can be used to sweeten foods, such as when cooking rhubarb, plums and other tart fruits. Diabetics and weight watchers have found licorice useful for sweetening and flavouring drinks, sherbets, puddings, etc.

A cup of licorice tea after a meal, has been a traditional aid to digestion. Try the tea chilled and served with ice in summer, as it is a thirst quencher, and it has been known to give “get-up-and-go” when suffering from heat fatigue! Even chewing on a small piece of licorice before a meal is beneficial, as it stimulates the salivary glands in the mouth. Chew on a licorice stick as an alternative to lollies, chocolate, or other sweet snacks. Some people, who visit the Herb Farm for licorice plants, remember with nostalgia, how, in their childhood, they could purchase natural licorice root and enjoyed sucking the sweet sticks. During World War II, when food and sugar was rationed, licorice was often the only sweet treat available in Europe. Chew on a stick when feeling stressed studying for exams, or for any stresses of life.

Several years ago, I had a man call at the farm and ask if I had anything that would help him give up smoking, as he had decided to quit smoking that morning and was having severe withdrawal symptoms. As we had just dug some licorice and had it drying, I offered him a stick (cut into 8 cm lengths so a similar length and size of a cigarette) and suggested he hold in his mouth like a cigarette and suck on the end. Within a couple of minutes of giving him the ‘stick to smoke’ his nerves had calmed and he said he no longer had the desire for a cigarette. For the next 10 minutes he kept sucking on the stick, and looking at it, wondering why his new "cigarette" did not have smoke coming from it! Over the next 2 weeks when he had the craving to smoke, he would pull out the licorice stick and was able to kick the habit of smoking nicotine. I have shared this incident with other people, who have done likewise and given up smoking. Also, worth noting are the health benefits, as well as the cost of licorice compared to cigarettes. A licorice stick can be used over and over many times; just bring it out of the pocket for a suck when desired, whenever
the quitter has the urge to light a cigarette. Maybe we can set a new trend in Australia, a health trend of smoking licorice sticks.

Licorice is a very special plant, the nutritive and rejuvenating properties have made it one of the most universally consumed herbs. Since earliest recorded history, it has been valued as a beautifying agent, aphrodisiac, used for vitality and longevity, and often called an elixir of life. It is one of the oldest and best-known remedies for coughs and respiratory conditions. In Egypt, licorice water was a popular sweet drink in the time of the pharaohs. Roman legions considered licorice indispensable ration for their long grueling campaigns; as it was said soldiers could go up to 10 days without eating or drinking as the licorice properties helped to build stamina and energy, which allayed both hunger and thirst. It is a time-honoured herb in Chinese medicine, dating back thousands of years. Chinese herbalism applied the principle of prevention, by emphasising the use of tonics and adaptogens, using plants like licorice, that regulate, strengthen and invigorate the whole body. Ten different bioflavonoids have been found in licorice, that have an effect of strengthening the immune system, fighting cancer cells and protecting from cancer. Licorice has been given many remedial applications: for hoarseness, mucus congestion, tonsillitis, nausea, fatigue, fevers; pancreas, kidney, bladder and gall complaints, skin allergies, endometriosis, infertility, menstrual and menopausal discomforts, poor circulation, diabetes, headaches, cold sores, shingles, candida, hemorrhoids, mouth ulcers, nervous tension, cramps, drug withdrawal, conjunctivitis, high cholesterol, low blood pressure, insomnia, AIDS, melanoma and cancer, to name a few. Numerous studies have been carried out on its therapeutic benefits particularly for duodenal and peptic ulcers, hormonal imbalances, respiratory and liver diseases. Studies show that it assists the liver to neutralise toxins. Trials have been done on patients with gastric ulcers in a number of countries. One study, showed relief to complete cure in 2-6 weeks with patients taking up to 20-25g daily. Another valuable action of licorice is oestrogen support and for strengthening the endocrine glands, and it has also shown immune stimulating properties. Studies show that natural licorice can kill the bacteria in the mouth that causes cavities and tooth decay.

This information should be more readily available; it certainly makes good sense to cut down on dentists bills.
Licorice should be avoided in cases of high blood pressure, cardiac and kidney conditions, myasthenia gravis sufferers, and also pregnant women (as it may cause fluid retention). Licorice may be incompatible with prescribed medication for hypertension and heart failure. Most people have no problem with eating the natural root, or licorice confectionary.

Is there potential for licorice as commercial crop? Yes, as the majority of Australians have never tasted licorice root in its natural form. Only a small amount is grown in Australia, with most being exported to Japan for sweetening foods. There is an opportunity for growers to supply processors, city markets, health food shops, tourist attractions, food expos, country markets, and school tuck-shops. On numerous occasions we have had phone calls to supply a large order, but have not had sufficient to fulfill orders. At the Herb Farm we sell the dried sticks and also sticks in cellophane snack packs with bright labels listing the uses. Some entrepreneur farmer could market “smokers snack packs” or other value added products. The uses of licorice for wellbeing make it an interesting and practical plant for every home garden, and for farmers to grow, so that our fellow Australians can experience the health benefits.

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Further information is available in Isabell’s books “How can I use Herbs in my daily life?” and also in “Absolutely Delicious Licorice, how to grow and use”