

SPICE OF THE MONTH

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August's spice is sesame seeds!

Is there a food quite as cosmopolitan as sesame? That iconic, smooth teardrop shape. Those classic colors: black, white, and brown.

Sesame is native to Southeast Asia and has proliferated all over the world. The ancient Assyrians fermented the tiny seeds for wine, and the ancient Greeks pressed them for oil. Modern uses include sweet, nutty, fudgelike halva and the rich tahini paste found in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cuisines, plus the aromatic oil used in the cuisines of multiple Asian nations — but sesame is truly ubiquitous.

Sesame plants can be cultivated anywhere with hot, dry weather. They grow up to five feet tall, and their white or pink flowers eventually develop into large seed pods that contain dozens of seeds that need to be harvested before they burst apart.

Wild strains from the Bantu nation of West Africa are called “benni” or “benne.” Among the Bantu people — as well as people from the Wolof, Mande, Mandingo, and Bambara nations — benne has culinary, cultural, and medicinal significance. Sesame plants were brought to the United States from Africa by enslaved people, and sesame plants are still grown in Texas and many southwestern states.

Sesame seeds are often incorporated into spice mixes, such as Middle Eastern za’atar, Indian kaala masala, and Japanese schichimi. They’re sprinkled over loaves of bread, including Italian semolina, Turkish pide, and Yiddish bagels.



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Library**

All books listed here are available to check out from the Croton Free Library!

Our sources:

- “Benne Seeds in the Lowcountry” from Charleston County Public Library: ccpl.org/charleston-time-machine/benne-seeds-lowcountry
- *The History and Natural History of Spices* by Ian Anderson
- *The Oxford Companion to Foods* by Alan Davidson

The recipes in this kit are:

- Sesame Seed and Brown Rice Crackers from *The Cracker Book* by Lee E. Cart (p. 69)
- Rangenak: Shirazi Date Slice from *Sun Bread & Sticky Toffee* by Sarah al-Hamad (p. 128)

See our cookbook collection for additional info & recipes, like:

- Beni Wafers from *The Gift of Southern Cooking* by Edna Lewis and Scott Peacock (p.227)
- Toasted Sesame Semifredo from *Dolce Italiano* by Gina DePalma (p.189)
- Nepali Green Bean-Sesame Salad from *Mangoes & Curry Leaves* by Jeffrey Alford and Naomi Duguid (p. 76)

What did you make with your sesame seeds?

Post it on social media with the hashtag
#CrotonSpiceClub and tag us, or send a photo &
description to ref@crotonfreelibrary.org!

Sesame seeds purchased from MySpiceSage.