

Did You Know?



Wasabi, *Eutrema japonicum*

- Wasabi is in the Brassicaceae family, the same as horseradish, mustard, cabbage, broccoli and kale.
- Originating in Japan, the use of wasabi can be traced back to 794 CE.
- Prepared wasabi comes from grating the rhizome of the plant. The “hot” flavor is distinct but more similar to horseradish than chili peppers in that it stimulates the nose more than the tongue.
- It is most commonly sold as a dried powder or as a paste in a tube. However, the condiment sold as wasabi often contains no wasabi at all. Instead, it is a mixture of horseradish, mustard and food coloring or spinach powder.
- Imitation wasabi is harsher with a heat that lingers longer than real wasabi. Imitation is also a thick, smooth paste rather than the gritty from fresh grating that real wasabi is.
- The leaves, rhizomes and flowers of the wasabi plant are all edible.
- The wasabi rhizome is grated just before serving. Uncovered, it begins to lose flavor 10-15 minutes after it has been prepared.
- Traditionally, the grater used to prepare wasabi was made from a piece of dry shark skin stapled to a wood paddle. The rhizome was grated by pressing it onto the paddle and moving in a circular motion until a paste was formed.
- The wasabi plant is difficult to grow from seed. The plant requires cool, shady conditions with high humidity and ample water during the summer. It takes 18 months to 3 years to reach maturity.
- Commercially, it is grown in northern Japan, parts of China, Taiwan, Korea and New Zealand. In North America, the rain forests on the Oregon Coast and parts of the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Carolina and Tennessee have been successful in growing wasabi.
- Compounds called isothiocyanates (ITCs) present in wasabi have anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties. Research shows that as an extract or powder, wasabi may offer protection from food borne illness such as *E. coli* and *Staphylococcus aureus*.
- A recent Japanese study showed that wasabi supplements showed an increase in memory compared to those that didn't use the supplements in adults ages 60 to 80. More research is needed.
- More research is also needed regarding the ITCs in wasabi rhizomes and leaves that may decrease the risk of several types of cancer. The current research is showing specific anti-cancer benefits.

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