

Is liquorice a root?

From the sweeties.net wiki

Yes, liquorice is a root. The name belongs to a plant, *Glycyrrhiza glabra*, and the sweet, aromatic flavour we know as liquorice is extracted from its roots. Every liquorice sweet starts life underground.

The plant

Liquorice is a perennial plant of the bean family, native to West Asia, tropical Asia, North Africa and southern Europe. It grows to about a metre tall, with feathery leaves and small flowers that range from purple to pale whitish blue, followed by pods holding a few seeds. It likes well drained soil in deep valleys with full sun, and the roots are harvested in the autumn, two to three years after planting. Countries producing it today include Turkey, Greece, Iran and Iraq.

Sweet root

The name says it all. The word liquorice comes, by way of Anglo French and Late Latin, from the Greek *glykyrrhiza*, meaning sweet root. The Latin was influenced by *liqueure*, to become fluid, which reflects the way the sweet part is drawn out of the roots.

The sweetness comes mainly from a compound in the root called *glycyrrhizin*, which makes up about 7 to 10 per cent of it and is 30 to 50 times sweeter than sugar. It is a different kind of sweetness: slower to arrive, a little tart, and longer lasting. The root is yellow inside, a colour that comes from natural flavonoids, and it is the concentrated extract that turns black: see [why is black liquorice black?](#)

Chewing the root

The simplest liquorice sweet is the root itself. Dried sticks of liquorice root were once a traditional sweet in Britain, as they still are in the Netherlands, where they are sold as *zoethout*, sweet wood, to chew on. In Italy, Spain and France the root is harvested, washed, dried and chewed as a mouth freshener.

Liquorice in Yorkshire

Nobody knows exactly when liquorice was first grown in England, but there are records of it by the 16th century, possibly in monastery gardens and as a crop for the gentry. The 1607 edition of Camden's *Britannia* noted it growing at Worksop and Pontefract. By 1780, English liquorice growing was concentrated almost entirely in Pontefract and in Surrey, around Godalming.

In Pontefract it was grown on plots of land behind people's houses. A map of the siege of Pontefract in 1648 shows liquorice growing in the garths either side of Micklegate, the street between the market place and the castle. Pontefract is where liquorice mixed with sugar was first made into sweets in the modern way, and

Pontefract cakes, stamped with an image of the castle, have been made there for centuries: see [why is liquorice called Spanish?](#)

A root to respect

Liquorice root is powerful stuff. Eating a lot of pure glycyrrhizin, more than 2 milligrams per kilogram of body weight a day, can cause problems such as high blood pressure, low potassium and muscle weakness, and liquorice root extract should be avoided during pregnancy. Much of the liquorice flavour in modern sweets is boosted with aniseed oil, which tastes similar but comes from a different plant: see [is aniseed the same as liquorice?](#)

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