

READING 17-2

Source: F. Rosengarten, Jr. 1969. *The Book Of Spices*, p. 23–96, Jove Publ., Inc., New York.

Silphium

Silphium was the most famous drug of the ancient Mediterranean world. The plant of the same name, from which the drug was obtained, grew chiefly in the hills near Cyrene (Libya), in North Africa, where it flourished between the seventh and second centuries BC. Large quantities were exported from Cyrene to Greece, and often it was sold by weight at the same rate as silver. By the first century AD, however, the plant had virtually become extinct, possibly due to overgrazing, since it was important as cattle fodder.

The botanical identification of ancient silphium is not clear. It is generally believed to have been *Ferula tingitana*, a sweet-smelling umbelliferous plant with thick stalks and roots that grows today as a rarity in Cyrenaica. The juice of this plant was known as “laserwort juice.”

The name silphium has also been applied, perhaps erroneously, to a foul-smelling Persian plant of the carrot family (genus *Ferula*), whose roots and rhizomes are the source of the medicinal gum resin asafetida. It was carried westward by Alexander the Great during the fourth century BC and is known as “stink-finger” in Afghanistan. As the silphium of Cyrene became extinct, asafetida may have gradually replaced it as a drug.

The genus *Silphium*, a name given by Linnaeus in 1737 to a group of hardy North American herbs of the family *Compositae*, occurs today in the Mississippi Valley and eastward, but these plants are not related to the silphium of the Greeks.

An extremely versatile herb, silphium was in great demand by the Greeks for use as a condiment, food preservative, gum resin, edible vegetable, and in medicine. As a condiment silphium was grated over meats and cabbage, as cheese is today. The stalk was considered an appetizing vegetable delicacy. As a drug the plant was an all-inclusive therapeutic agent, prescribed for fevers, coughs, lumbago, mange, and diseases of the eye; it was applied to remove corns and ingested to cure toothache, promote menstruation, dissolve blood clots, and eliminate worms. It was also employed as an antidote for scorpion bites.

The residents of Cyrene advertised and promoted silphium to such an extent that visitors occasionally tired of hearing about it. Antiphanes, an Athenian poet who visited Cyrene during the fourth century BC, wrote: “I will not sail back to the place [Cyrene] from which we were carried away, for I want to say good-bye to all horses, silphium, chariots, silphium stalks, steeplechasers, silphium leaves, fevers, and silphium juice.”

The economic importance of silphium in ancient Cyrene, a Spartan colony, is recorded on the inside of a Laconian *kylix* (cup), probably made by Cyrenaic potters, in the sixth century BC, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. It is believed to show King Arcesilas II of Cyrene himself supervising the weighing and loading of a ship with this renowned bygone herb.

The export of Silphium, 6th century BC.

Silphium was the most famous medicinal plant (now extinct) of the ancient Mediterranean world. This illustration, from a Cyrenaic drinking cup (6th century BC) shows the weighing and loading of silphium at Cyrene, North Africa, where it was chiefly grown.

