

Capers—*Capparis spinosa* L.¹

James M. Stephens²

Capers are unopened flower buds produced on the caperbush. This shrubby perennial plant grows 3–5 feet high, with numerous branches, bearing a pair of hooked spines at the base of each leaf stalk. Leaves are alternate, round to ovate, thick, and glistening. Flowers are about 2 inches in diameter, white with numerous violet stamens, and very pleasing in appearance. Seeds are large, kidney shaped, and gray-brown in color. There is also a variety without spines, from which the crop is gathered more easily and without injury to the hands.

Caperbush is native to the Mediterranean region where the plant is still grown commercially. Little if any is grown in the United States, even in home gardens. Capers shipped to Britain and other European countries generally are grown in Spain and Africa. Southern Russia was a major exporter at one time. In Northern Africa the most commonly used caper is the Timbuctoo caper (*C. sodala*). A popular South African caper is *C. corymbifera*.

Use

Capers are picked daily since the youngest flowerbuds (about the size of peas) have the highest quality. Capers are valued in proportion to the smallness of their size. They are pickled in vinegar or sometimes in salted vinegar. Both the capers and the young berries are used in sauces and pickling, primarily in European dishes.

Culture

Little is known about the culture of capers in the United States or Florida. The literature indicates that the caperbush can be cultivated profitably only in the climate of the olive tree, where it is almost always planted in dry stony places, on embankments, and other difficult to use areas.

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