

**INCORRIGIBLE COLONIST:
GINGER IN AUSTRALIA, 1788–1950**

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Thesis submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in History

School of History and Politics

University of Adelaide

October 2010

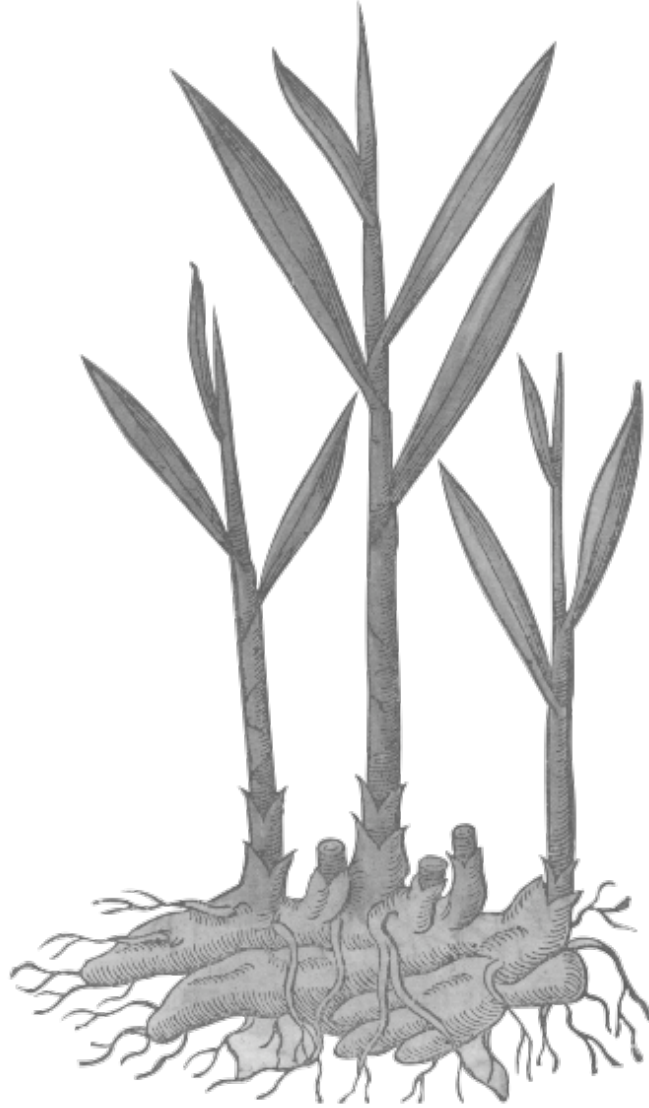


FIGURE 1 Botanical Illustration of the Ginger Plant

Source: Gerarde, *Herball*, 61, from Barr Smith Library, University of Adelaide.

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ABSTRACT

Ginger, an ‘incorrigible colonist’ since prehistoric times, was transported to Australia as both living plant and dried spice on the First Fleet. The spice was in great demand in Britain, and Joseph Banks considered the plant a potential economic crop for the new colony. From the early 19th century, Chinese settlers also brought ginger rhizomes with them. This thesis provides a commodity history of ginger, focusing on ginger growing and the use of ginger in Australia from 1788 to the mid-20th century.

Both British and Chinese settlers arrived in Australia determined to maintain their traditional culinary and medical practices, which required large quantities of ginger. The thesis argues that it was the extent of this demand, together with suitable growing conditions, which eventually led to the establishment of an Australian ginger industry. It highlights the important part played by Chinese settlers, and adds to the written history of Australian culinary and medical practices.

The Australian story is set in the context of ginger’s long-standing importance in China, India and Britain. Ginger has been indispensable to Chinese and Indian medicine and food since antiquity, and it was one of the earliest spices to reach the West. The thesis begins by exploring ginger in China and India, and then follows the spice from India through ancient Greece and Rome to Britain, where ginger became used widely in both food and medicine. It also traces the much later journey of the plant from India to the West Indies and then to hothouses in Britain, from where it was brought to Australia.

Ginger was grown in the first garden in Sydney. As settlements were established further north, ginger thrived in Australia's sub-tropical and tropical areas. Despite this, and considerable efforts by governments to persuade farmers to grow ginger commercially, a large-scale Australian ginger industry was not established until the mid-20th century. A major obstacle was that the British required ginger in dried and preserved forms, and processing had to be carried out close to the source of production. Chinese settlers also grew ginger, but Chinese and European ginger growing enterprises were carried out almost completely independently, with little communication. While Chinese gardeners supplied much of the Chinese need for fresh ginger, the Chinese also required ginger in dried and preserved forms.

From the beginning of European settlement, large quantities of dried and preserved ginger were imported to meet the ever-increasing demands. As Australians continued British culinary practices, home cooks and food manufacturers used ginger extensively in a variety of cakes and puddings, jams and preserves, condiments and curries, and beverages.

Chinese settlers, too, maintained their own food traditions. In addition, ginger continued to be valued for its medicinal properties. Traditional British and Chinese medical practices involved the widespread use of ginger for essentially the same purposes, principally to treat cold-related illnesses, as a digestive, and as a stimulant. The thesis provides compelling evidence that ginger remained in great demand in food and medicine for the period studied.

DECLARATION

This thesis contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution to Leonie Anne Ryder and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many individuals and organisations assisted me in my research and often did much more than was strictly necessary. To all of them, too numerous to detail their specific contributions, I am very grateful.

At the University of Adelaide, I wish to thank in particular my supervisor, Professor Barbara Santich. Thanks, too, to my co-supervisor, Associate Professor Rachel Ankeny, and Margaret Hosking and others at the Barr Smith Library. In Adelaide, thanks also to: Tony Kanellos, Adelaide Botanic Gardens; Mark Pharaoh, South Australian Museum; Brian Bingley and other staff at the State Library of South Australia; and the South Australian Archives.

Those who assisted me in Queensland include: many staff at the State Library of Queensland; Joan Hogarth; Leigh Hall; Noel Hall; Stephen Longbottom; Ray Poon; Kevin Rains; Halina Winters, Herbarium Library; Brian Thomas and others, Buderim Historical Society; the Chinese Historical Society; the Cairns Historical Society; Janice Wegner, James Cook University, Townsville; John Ruscoe, Buderim Ginger Limited; the Department of Primary Industries; the Queensland State Archives; the Queensland Museum; Laurel Asimus; Doris Crerar; James Duthie; Esme Oliver; and Anne Wood.

In New South Wales, thanks are due to: Liz Rouse, Library of the Royal Australian College of Physicians, Sydney; Megan Martin, Caroline Simpson Library, Sydney; Monique Galloway, Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority; the State Library of New South Wales; the Wollongbar Agricultural Institute; Olwen King; and Rose Leeson.

Those to whom I am grateful in Darwin include: Kathy de la Rue; François Barr, Northern Territory Archives Service; John Richards and other staff, Northern Territory Library; and Ken Wu, Chun Wah Society.

In Canberra, I was assisted by: Colin Bannerman; the National Archives; and the National Library.

Valuable British information was received from: Laura Mason; David Frodin, Chelsea Physic Garden; Jeremy Bruhl and Mark Nesbitt, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew; and Leonie Paterson, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh.

Finally, very special thanks to the late Frank Fielding of Buderim, who inspired me to research ginger and who gave generously of his time.