



THE TRUTH ABOUT THISTLE . . . IT'S NOT!

Did you know that the seed sold to feed goldfinches isn't (and never has been!) thistle seed? It is nyjer seed. The label often given to this small black seed — thistle — is not only confusing, it's incorrect. The niger plant, with its yellow flower, is not related to the purple-flowered thistle, the large, hardy weed quite unloved by farmers and gardeners alike.

Niger plants have been grown in Ethiopia, Myanmar and India for centuries, where probably three-fourths of the crop is crushed and used as edible oil. The name may have come from the river Niger that flows for some 2,600 miles through the northern parts of the continent. Recently the name "nyjer" has been trademarked and should be used to identify seed sold to feed goldfinches.

Nyjer has had its problems through the years in ways other than what it is called. By 1985, the majority of nyjer seed imports arriving on the east coast were found to contain the noxious weed "dodder." To devitalize this, steam treating for 15 minutes at 212°F was made a mandatory "condition of entry." Nearly 10 years later, importation came to a dead halt when an additional nine noxious weeds and eight disease-associated weeds were identified with nyjer imports. To devitalize any weed seed that might be present, the steam-treating temperature was raised to 250°F.

With a new name and undesirable weeds no longer a problem, nyjer seed continues to be the preferred food of a backyard favorite—the American goldfinch.