Sweet fennel is a perennial herb up that reaches to 1.80 meters in height. Its long, flexible, tubulous stems bear masses of light, feathery leaves. Several umbels made of small yellow flowers bloom in summer and produce pale-yellow to light-green fruits. Harvested when they become tinged with yellow, indicating maturity, the fruits are then dried and distilled. Sweet fennel essential oil has a lovely, characteristic aniseed fragrance, thus the common French names meaning “French anise” and “sweet dill.” The very sweet, aromatic fragrance has an earthy note with a spicy accent reminiscent of pepper.

Most likely native to the island of Malta, sweet fennel was introduced to the rest of Europe by monks or crusaders a thousand years ago. Known since ancient times, it was used medicinally by the Egyptians, then by the Greeks and Romans. The plant is now cultivated in Europe, Asia, and parts of Africa and South America. Cultivars were selected for quality and the seeds’ essential-oil yield.