HORTICULTURE COLUMN

VEGETARIAN PLANTS

When you get hungry, do you hit the drive through, go for the microwave or take a trip to the closest snack machine? These are all luxuries which many of our neighbors cannot afford. Hunger and nutrition are issues which affect our homeless residents and local families as well as our neighbors around the globe. Agriculture in America provides such popular crops as tomatoes, corn, wheat, lettuce, beans and cabbage. Our major food crops were imported and bred to improve certain desirable characteristics. Many countries are looking at lesser known plants to provide food, fiber, medicine and shelter. Perhaps we should learn from them.

A recent news article on moringa, *Moringa oleifera*, a native of India, got me thinking about the value of many unfamiliar plants. Also known as the horseradish tree here in Florida, moringa has highly nutritious edible leaves and seed pods which can be eaten fresh or dried. The plant has been used to settle sediment to clarify water and is reported to have antibiotic properties. Moringa grows wild in many parts of the world, but the local people were unfamiliar with the beneficial attributes of this miracle plant.

Hank Bruce, author, gardener, humanitarian, philosopher and friend, shares information on many unusual and underutilized food and herbal plants in his book, *The Global Garden*, which will be released later this summer. He shares his insight on the value of biodiversity in our home gardens and the cultural exchange and education available while learning about many unfamiliar plants.

With his permission, I am sharing some information on a few leafy greens that thrive in Florida's summer heat & humidity. They all provide a continuing harvest throughout the season. Most are attractive plants in the landscape as well, making them multi-purpose plants (Okinawa spinach, quailgrass, mountain orach, and Brazilian spinach are among the most attractive). Also, they will all grow as container plants.

*Spinach oleifera* is the typical green spinach of Popeye fame. Many other plants have the same common name. They are potherbs which produce edible leaves which are boiled or cooked like spinach. Why not try them?

Malabar spinach, featured at EPCOT's Land, has attracted a lot of interest. The plant grows as a heat tolerant vine with red or green foliage. Harvest frequently as mature leaves are tough. Young leaves and shoots taste like sweet corn and can be eaten fresh or cooked.

New Zealand spinach is another hot weather groundcover crop. It has potential as a heat hardy hanging basket. Seeds are often available commercially. The plants are drought tolerant and grow in full sun or light shade. Plants grow from cuttings and reseed easily in frost free areas. Tender new shoots can be used in a salad. For the best cooked flavor, boil the leaves twice, pour off the first water and add fresh water for the final cooking.

Relatives of true spinach and beets include strawberry spinach and tree spinach. Strawberry spinach gets its name from the small strawberry like fruit which can be eaten raw or cooked. Young leaves are eaten in soups and salads. It reseeds easily, as Hank Bruce puts it, "with enthusiasm." Beware of where you plant it. Tree spinach grows to a height of 8" or more. Eaten cooked or raw, this is another easy to grow vegetable.

Mountain spinach, *Atriplex hortensis*, known as garden orach, is another spinach relative. This attractive plant produces four to 6 foot tall plants with leaves that may be red, green or white depending
on the variety. Coastal gardeners may want to try this salt tolerant green. Leaves are arrowhead shaped and can be eaten raw or cooked. Keep flower spikes trimmed to promote tender growth.

African spinach, *Celosia argentea* is in the *Amaranth* family. This African native is known as quailgrass in the United States. This plant is an annual which produces attractive flowers suitable for drying. The leaves are red and green and can be eaten fresh or cooked. Tender stems can be cooked like asparagus shoots. This heat lover grows well in pots or in the garden. Provide full sun and adequate moisture. Harvest often to maintain plants at 2 - 3' high.

Brazilian spinach, *Alternanthera sisso*, as its name implies, is native to South America. This plant is another amaranth but grows as a groundcover growing to 10 - 12" high. It thrives in partial shade or full sun and prefers soil enriched with compost.

Chinese spinach, *Amaranth gangeticus*, is another heat loving annual. It is a popular addition to Asian diets. This plant grows quickly from seed. Grow it in full sun and provide uniform moisture for best flavor.

A daisy relative, Okinawa spinach, *Gynura crepiodes*, has attractive succulent leaves which are dark green above and purple underneath. Leaves have a nutty taste. Eat the leaves fresh or lightly steam them to avoid a mushy product. The daisy like blooms attract butterflies. Hank has found this one to be the most adapted to our Florida summers.

If you are unable to locate seeds, contact Hank Bruce directly at 352-383-2704 or by e-mail at hankbruce@mail2.LCIA.com. He is anxious to hear about your growing experiences. Diversify your garden, plant some uncommon vegetables and learn about other cultures. You may find we have a lot in common...we need to eat.

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Educational Concerns for Hunger Organization, or ECHO, is located in North Ft. Myers. The group shares information and seeds from a variety of crops being used and evaluated throughout the world. They conduct classes and tours and link growers to research. For more information, visit them on the web at [http://www.echonet.org](http://www.echonet.org) or call 941-543-3246.

Jim Stephens, vegetable specialist at the University of Florida has produced a Manual of Minor Vegetables which includes growing tips on a variety of uncommon vegetables. Contact the Osceola Cooperative Extension Service at (321) 697-3000 or email us at epabon5@ufl.edu for ordering information.

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