



"A" Is For Amaranth

Sat, 04/28/2012 - 15:52 -- BrotherJoseph

Because of Amaranth's use in religious rituals, the Spanish forbade it's cultivation. People had their hands cut off for defying this edict. The prohibition was probably because in some ceremonies, the seeds were mixed with human blood and made into cakes or figurines, which were then eaten. Mmmmm, sounds yummy! I'm sure that certain overstuffed television personalities would eat them if they were available today.

Let me put it on record this first full day in Taurus, the sign of food and the eating thereof (This post is a week late!). Amaranth may not save the World, but it's cultivation can certainly make it a better place. Amaranthus is an ancient species that has been used all over the world for thousands of years. It is nutritious, esthetically pleasing, easy to grow, drought tolerant, and most importantly, delicious. The plant grows fast and is insect and disease resistant. It is drought and heat tolerant. It needs no fertilizers, "cides" or special equipment. It tastes like spinach, but more minerally, if that's a word. Hmmm, SpellCheck seems to think not. OK, how about the entirely overused "earthy."

I have been growing Amaranth for three years here in MesoAmerica. I am now on at least the 6th generation of Red Garnet Amaranth from seeds originally purchased from the [Sustainable Seed Company](#) [1]. I have only never seriously tried to use the seed for food. Note to self: I imagine they would make great sprouts. They are still used in Mexico (toasted) to make alegria, a sweet treat that can actually be good for you.

Amaranth leaves are an excellent source of Vitamin A, iron, calcium, protein, vitamin C, and trace minerals. I primarily use fresh young leaves in salads. My most recent batch of pesto included about an 1/8 part amaranth, as well as an 1/8 part Aztec Red Spinach (Huazontle), which is giving amaranth a run for it's money as my favorite plant. Huazontle is a closely related species that grows super fast and is also delicious and nutritious.

Older leaves can be steamed or stir-fried. Here in Belize, the "local" variety appears to be *Amaranthus viridis* (how did that get here from Asia?). It sells for \$1BZE per bunch, and is usually starting to wilt by the time it's sold. The mature leaves are usually stewed and served as "calaloo," which is also the local, or more specifically Caribbean name for the plant. Sometimes the Taiwanese vendors will have the beautiful variety *Amaranthus tricolor*, called een choy or xian cai in Cantonese. Note: it seems to me plants with red or purple in them do better in extreme heat/drought conditions than purely green ones.

Amaranthus contains more iron than spinach. The seeds are high in Vitamin E and Omega-3. Amaranth flour is gluten free. It contains lysine, which most cereals lack. Amaranth contains proteins and trace elements lacking in other grains. Combining it with other grain flours may be one fast and easy method to immediately improve the diets of, well, many, many people. For example, Amaranth flour combined with corn flour gives an ideal protein value of 100. The seeds would also make ideal poultry feed.

Here is an interesting historical side note from the [Kokopelli Seed Foundation](#): [2] "In Peru, in the region of Huancavalica, the peasants use the stem of the *Amaranthus* for its high calcium content. After harvesting the

grain panicles they burn the stems, then collect the cinders and mix them with water in order to soak the maize destined to make the dough for the tamales?.

This use of the stems of the Amaranthus is not fortuitous and it demonstrates the wisdom of ancient peoples. It is a fact that when maize was introduced into many countries in the world, some peoples became wholly dependant upon it eating it without regard to the eventual alimentary deficiencies of the diet. These peoples who adopted maize as their sole food source became susceptible to the disease pellagra, which causes lesions of the skin and a general degeneration both physical and mental.

However, in the Americas, the birthplace of maize, there was no pellagra. The supposedly primitive cultivators of the New World had in fact developed a sophisticated technique and anticipated the discoveries of modern science. The Mayas, Aztecs and peoples of North America had intuitively perceived that cooking the maize in a water containing cinders greatly improved the supply of vitamins to be had from the maize. The maize reacted chemically with the calcium in the cinders and released certain amino acids. The calcium freed the niacin, which previously was chemically bound in, thus permitting its assimilation by the human body. It is thus that the posole? is still made and this method of alcalinisation of maize is still alive in Peru in the method of the use of cinders of the stems of Amaranthus to make tamales."

?The planetary epic of the immortal Amaranthus remains steeped in mystery. How can it be that for many centuries now Asia, and in particular, India, has been the principal centre of cultivation? Numerous researchers have grappled with this enigma, but it seems clear that the centres of the genetic origins of the grain Amaranthus lie in the Americas.?

According to the [World Watch Institute](#) [3], the native Mexicans from over sixty farming villages working with the Alternativas cooperatives have integrated amaranth into their cropping system, and have banded together to begin producing amaranth food products. Rising levels in both production and demand for this nutritious crop are promising for both local people's incomes and the health of people worldwide.

And so our television series begins in Central America, where SubCommandanteUno has been turning jungle into food.....

Image (optional):

