

INGREDIENTS



CHAYA

Botanical name

Cnidoscolus chayamansa

Mayan name

Chaay, chaykeken

Common English names

Tree spinach, pig chaya

Etymology

- *Cnidoscolus* is from the Greek *cnido* (stinging) and *scolus* (thorn), an obvious reference to the irritating hairs on the chaya plant and leaves. *Chayamansa* is a hybrid word of the Mayan *chaay* and the Latin *mansa* meaning house, dwelling or farm. The term refers to the domesticated plant.
- *Chaykeken* is a hybrid of the Mayan *chaay* and *keken*, meaning pig, suggesting that the bush is a favored food of the animal.
- *Tree spinach* in English is an obvious interpretation of the form and use of the plant; and *pig chaya* is a direct translation of the Mayan *chaykeken*.

History and heritage

Although found widely throughout the Maya world, the greatest variety of names for the plant as well as knowledge of its use is found in Yucatán, which points to the region as the area of origin and the place where *chaya* was ultimately domesticated. There are several varieties of *chaya*, but the most common, *chayamansa*, cannot reproduce sexually and so it is understood to be a domesticated plant that must be tended by human beings. Because it grows readily from cuttings, *chaya* has been cultivated since prehispanic times, and is still planted in family orchards or gardens, and close to the house as an ornamental. In this way it is easily accessible for daily use as food, medicine and to sell for a subsistence income. Among the Mayas of Yucatán and the Kekchi Maya of Guatemala, *chaya* has long been and remains a significant part of the staple diet and is the main dietary source of leafy vegetables.

Chaya has recently come under the scrutiny of botanists and nutritionists alike for its ease of propagation in hospitable climates, and for its remarkable dietary benefits. The edible parts of the plant, which taste something like spinach when cooked, are exceptionally high in protein, Vitamins A and C, niacin, riboflavin, thiamine and carotene, as well as minerals such as calcium, iron, potassium and phosphorus. In fact, its nutritional content is two to threefold greater than most edible leafy green vegetables such as spinach or chard. As a traditional remedy, *chaya* has been recommended for a number of ailments including diabetes, obesity, kidney stones, hemorrhoids, acne, and eye problems. *Chaya* shoots and leaves have been taken as a laxative, diuretic, circulation stimulant, to improve digestion, to stimulate lactation, and to harden the fingernails. *Chaya* is a bushy perennial that can grow up to 20 feet (six meters) in height. Its five-lobed leaves, which fall in the dry season or periods of draught, are large and can measure up to 12 inches (32cm) long and 10 – 11 inches (30cm) wide.

Culinary uses

It is the leaves of the *chaya* plant that are consumed. *Chaya* should never be eaten raw; the leaves contain a high level of hydrocyanic acid and therefore can be quite toxic. However, just one minute of boiling destroys most of the acid. *Chaya* also features invisible micro-fibers that can be irritating to the skin. People with skin sensitivities should wear gloves when handling *chaya*. Because *chaya* is rather tough, the leaves are plunged into boiling salted water and simmered over moderately high heat for 20 minutes and then drained. Cooked *chaya* is usually chopped before incorporating into a recipe. In Yucatán, there are many recipes that call for *chaya*, such as *tamales*, scrambled eggs and even beverages. It is also sautéed with onions, garlic and bell peppers to make a nourishing side dish. As a cultivar, *chaya* is slowly making inroads in southern tier United States, particularly south Texas and Florida. If fresh *chaya* is not available, Yucatecan recipes calling for *chaya* can be prepared with spinach as a substitute.