

## Chaya - Mayan Tree Spinach - *Cnidoscolus aconitifolius*



Also known as famine tree, Chaya is a champion summer green in the food forest and the nutritious backbone of a tropical edible landscape.

Leaves are rich in protein, vitamins, calcium, iron, and antioxidants, containing two to three times more nutrients than other, more common leafy vegetables. Kaempferol and quercetin are the most abundant phenolic compounds identified in Chaya. Studies in animal models have demonstrated the effects of Chaya, which included reduction of glucose intolerance, anti-inflammatory effects, antioxidant activity and reduction of lipids in the blood which promotes cardiovascular health.

Chaya is a large, fast-growing leafy perennial shrub that is pest free and very adaptable. Leaves can be harvested continuously as long as no more than 50% of the leaves are removed from the plant, which guarantees healthy new plant growth.

Believed to have originated in the Yucatan where it is often found growing in door yard gardens for easy harvest. It can easily grow to be 15 feet tall, but is normally regularly pruned to about 5 feet for easier leaf harvest. Thriving in the hot humid climate of the Keys,

even in full summer sun Chaya is one of the most productive green vegetables in the world.

Be aware, the succulent stems exude a milky sap when cut that can cause skin irritation. Some sources indicate that only up to 5 raw leaves can be safely eaten a day. Raw leaves are used to make agua fresca in Mexico, so perhaps this is a cultural adaptation.

In any case, to be safe, leaves should be boiled 5-15 minutes before eating because they do contain hydrocyanic acid which is toxic to humans. Cooking the leaves releases the toxic substance as a harmless gas. Remember to cook the leaves in non reactive cookware, do not cook chaya in aluminum cookware to avoid digestive disturbance. Traditionally, leaves are immersed and simmered for 15-20 minutes in a stainless steel, clay or enamel pot and then served with salt and oil or butter.

Cooked leaves do not get mushy and can be chopped and used like cooked spinach. The cooking liquid or pot liquor can be safely consumed. Adding chopped leaves to boiling soup or cooking beans is also a convenient option. Leaves simmered whole make a tasty appetizer stuffed with herbed farmer's cheese or rice similar to Greek dolma.

Chaya is easily propagated by cuttings. This valuable and exceptionally nutritious plant has been part of the Key West Community Garden since 2010. The thick hedge of Chaya plants that surround the garden are allowed to grow tall all summer but pruned down to 4-5 feet each fall to allow more sunlight into the garden for the winter growing season.

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