



Leaves, Shoots and Hearts: A Guide to Some of Northern Thailand's Perennial Vegetables

Upland Holistic Development Project and The ECHO Asia Regional Impact Center; Chiang Mai, Thailand

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Traditional foods



In a land that has sustained its upland and lowland residents for thousands of years, one would expect a diversity of foods from the countless paddies and hill fields...

Traditional foods



... home gardens...

Traditional foods



... as well as from the forests.

Importance of vegetables in local diets



The traditional foods of northern Thailand are not heavy laden with animal protein. Instead they offer more in the form of carbohydrates (such as rice) or as vegetables. In fact, a wide variety of vegetables form the basis of local nutrition.

Two basic types of vegetables



Regarding vegetables, there are two main categories: annuals, such as upland water spinach...

Two basic types of vegetables



... and perennials, such as *cha-om* (*Acacia pennata*)._

Seasonal availability of vegetables



A greater variety of annual vegetables is available during the rainy season.

Seasonal availability of vegetables



But due to the annual six-month dry season, year round production of vegetables depends on the availability of water for irrigation. Unfortunately, water isn't always available in many locations.

End of vegetable self-sufficiency?



Because of such production constraints, vegetables are often purchased from the outside with hard earned cash.

Traditional vegetable preservation



However, limited amounts of certain types of vegetables are sometimes preserved to extend availability, such as these traditionally pickled mustard greens.

Introducing perennial vegetables



But because perennial vegetables are generally deep-rooted and drought tolerant, various types of edible perennials offer nutrition even during the driest months.

Introducing perennial vegetables



Many of these perennial vegetables, such as *pak wan pa* (*Melientha suavis*), are indigenous forest species still found in the wild.

Introducing perennial vegetables



Others, such as sesbania flower (*Sesbania grandiflora*), are naturalized exotics.

Definition of vegetable:



- A. A plant cultivated for an edible part, such as the root of the beet, the leaf of spinach, or the flower buds of broccoli or cauliflower.
- B. The edible part of such a plant.
- C. A member of the vegetable kingdom; a plant.

Definition of vegetable:



For the northern Thai context we offer a broad definition of a vegetable:

Any edible part of either cultivated or wild plants, typically leaves, shoots, stem hearts, flowers and fruits.

Definition of vegetable:

This definition excludes:

- Carbohydrate-rich grains, roots or fruits eaten as staples, e.g., rice and cassava roots.
- Fruits and roots eaten as desserts, e.g., banana fruits and taro roots.



Drying tea leaves.



Viny forest pepper is consumed as a spice.

- Dried legume seeds (pulses), e.g., pigeon pea, soybean.
- Portions of certain plants consumed as spices and condiments, e.g. chillies, black pepper.
- Plant parts consumed as beverages, e.g., tea leaves and coffee beans.

Vegetable or not?



Banana fruit

Whether a plant or plant part is considered a vegetable or not may depend on: (1) the part of the plant to be consumed, (2) the stage of development of the edible plant part or (3) the way the plant part is prepared as a food.

For instance, a banana can be both a fruit and a vegetable. In northern Thailand the fruit is generally eaten and/or prepared as a dessert or snack.



Banana blossom

However, the blossom of some banana varieties is consumed in certain local vegetable dishes such as salads and curries.

Vegetable or not?



Fresh, mature jackfruit is typically consumed as a dessert fruit.

The fruit of jackfruit



Whereas young jackfruit can also be boiled, curried or cooked in other ways similar to vegetables.

Boiled jackfruit

Vegetable or not?



Cassava, the root crop, can also be...



...cassava the leafy vegetable.

Vegetable or not?



Pigeon pea (*Cajanus cajan*), the pulse, can also be...



...pigeon pea the pod vegetable.

Defining perennials



What makes a perennial a perennial? A perennial is often described as a plant that lives longer than two years. Many perennial vegetable species are obvious, particularly the woody varieties such as this cluster fig (*Ficus racemosa*).

Defining perennials



However, some herbaceous (soft-stem) vegetables are less obviously perennial, including:

Malabar spinach (*Basella alba*) and...



...ivy gourd (*Coccinia grandis*)

Food preparation and dining



Given the great variety of perennial vegetables, there are also numerous ways that local foods are prepared and consumed, including salads such as this one made from the blossom of forest banana.

Food Preparation and Dining



Certain leaf shoots (e.g., *Ficus*, *Leucaena* spp.) and fruits (*Solanum* spp.) are also consumed raw, often dipped in various types of pepper sauces.

Food preparation and dining



Other perennial vegetables are steamed or blanched prior to dipping. Such vegetables include:

smooth fig shoots (*Ficus racemosa*) and...



...snowflake tree leaf shoots (*Trevesia palmata*).

Food preparation and dining



Additionally, various perennial vegetables go into dipping sauces with chili peppers being the key ingredient. These include sauces made with rattan and bamboo shoots as well as *Solanum* fruits.

Food preparation and dining

Dipping for beginners



Step One – Prepare your dip and dipping vegetables.

Seen in photo: rattan/chili dip; raw *Leucaena* leaf shoots; raw *Solanum* fruits, blanched *Clerodendrum* leaves; and blanched snowflake tree leaf shoots.

Food preparation and dining



Dipping for beginners

Step two - Grasp your dipping vegetable of choice and lower into the sauce.



Step three - Enjoy.

Food preparation and dining



Another important type of food made from perennial vegetables include the curries.

This curry includes snowflake flower, heart of fishtail palm and *Ficus* leaf shoots.

Food preparation and dining



And one more means of preparing various perennial vegetables is stir frying.

These red shoot fig leaves are being stir fried with chicken.

The leaves



New red shoot fig leaves in early March.

Among northern Thailand's perennial vegetables are numerous leafy types, including red shoot fig (*Ficus virens*).

This fig is indigenous to the forests of Thailand and commonly found in home gardens.

“Look at the fig leaves and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near.” Luke 21:29-30.

Red shoot fig is among various perennial vegetable species that produce edible leaf shoots during the dry season, offering a source of nutrition during a parched, barren period.

The leaves



Red shoot fig leaf tips are harvested particularly during Feb – March and consumed as a raw dipping vegetable. But they are also steamed, stir fried, pickled and curried in various dishes.