

Identifying, Preserving, & Promoting Neglected & Underutilized Species

ECHO Asia Impact Center

A person is shown from the side, wearing a blue and white checkered shirt, washing green leafy vegetables in a black plastic tub. The person's hands are visible, carefully handling the plants. To the right of the tub is a white ceramic plate with a decorative border of red and orange floral patterns. The plate is filled with the same green leafy vegetables. The background shows a dirt ground and a wire mesh fence.

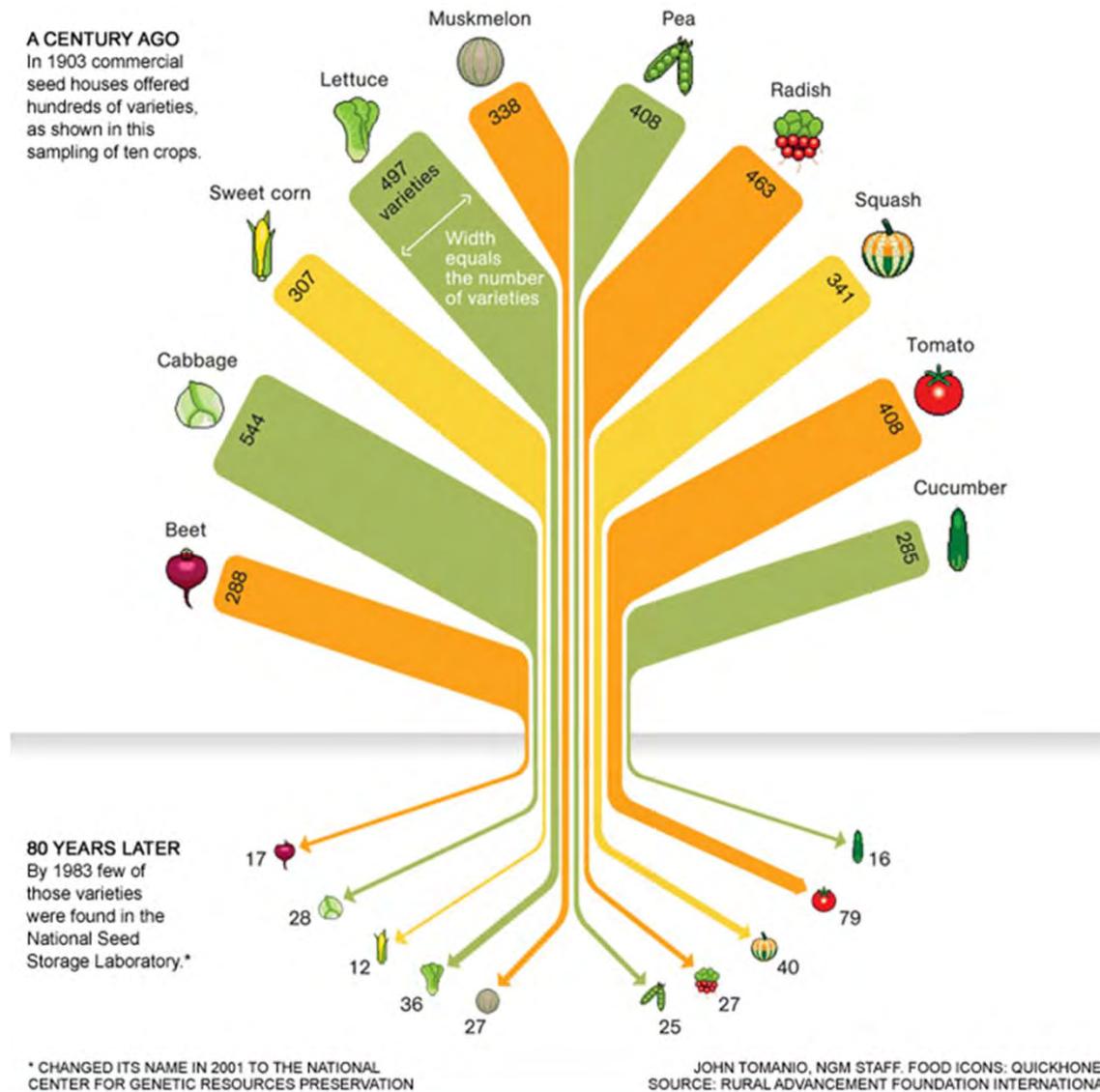


DIMINISHING PLANT BIODIVERSITY

Diminishing Plant Species Biodiversity

- During their history, human beings have used over **40,000** _____ plant species for food, fiber, forage, fuel, industrial, cultural, and medicinal purposes.
- Approximately **7,000** _____ cultivated species are still in use today around the world.
- Less than **150** _____ plant species are currently commercialized and in use on a global scale.
- Just **12** _____ of these provide over 75% of the world's food, with the majority of the calories coming from just three: corn, rice, & wheat.

Diminishing Plant Species Biodiversity



Comparison of seed varieties sold by commercial U.S. seed houses in 1903 with those in the U.S. National Seed Storage Laboratory in 1983.

The survey found that about 93 percent of the varieties had gone extinct.

A Narrowing Pool of Global Food Crops

- Only 30 species provide 95 percent of our food energy needs.
- Of these, three crops – wheat, maize, and rice, provide **over half** of the world's food energy needs.
- Is it realistic to expect to feed a population of more than 7 billion people, which is expected to rise to more than 9 billion within 40 years, from a base of only 30 crop species?

(Hart, 2007)



What Can Be Done?

A large, shallow wooden tray is filled with a large quantity of dark, round seeds, possibly beans, which are spread out across the surface. The tray is positioned in the foreground, and the background is dimly lit, showing several large, crumpled plastic bags hanging from a wooden structure. The overall scene suggests a traditional seed processing or storage environment.

LOCAL SEED SYSTEMS

Informal Seed Systems



- Farmer self-saved seed, farmer-to-farmer exchange, etc.
- Important sources of seed for smallholder farmers.
- Critical component of resource-poor farming systems.
- Often responsible for over 75% of food crop seed planted (Alemkinders et al., 1994)

Value of Local, Informal Seed Systems

- Facilitates maintenance of crop bio-diversity by preserving *in situ* locally adapted varieties.
- Broadens genetic base of production with multiple varieties adapted to specific production systems and microclimates.
- Provides seed/food security during instability, natural disaster, climate change.





INTRODUCTION TO NEGLECTED & UNDERUTILIZED SPECIES (NUS)

Neglected & Underutilized Species (NUS)



Neglected & Underutilized Species (NUS)

- Definition of underutilized crops – “Species with underexploited potential for contributing to food security, nutrition, health, income generation, and environmental services” (FAO-2007).
- Also known as: neglected, minor, lost, promising, alternative, and traditional (Hart, 2007)
- But regarded as underutilized by whom?

Why Might a Crop be NUS?



- Limited range of growth (e.g. particular growth requirements)
- Limited recognition
- Products not as able to be transported or processed as wheat, corn, or rice for distribution
- Edible portions inconvenient to access (e.g. edible hearts of rattan shoots are cloaked in thorny stems)

Why Might a Crop by NUS?



- Nutritional issues and toxins require special processing
 - High oxalates (taro leaves and stems)
 - Cyanide compounds (Chaya, cassava leaves and tubers)
- Not widely considered as palatable (bitter, astringent)

Wise Use of NUS Can:

- Contribute substantially to food security.
- Increase incomes among the poor.
- Improve nutrition and health.
- Sustain healthy ecosystems.



What are some examples of NUS from your area?





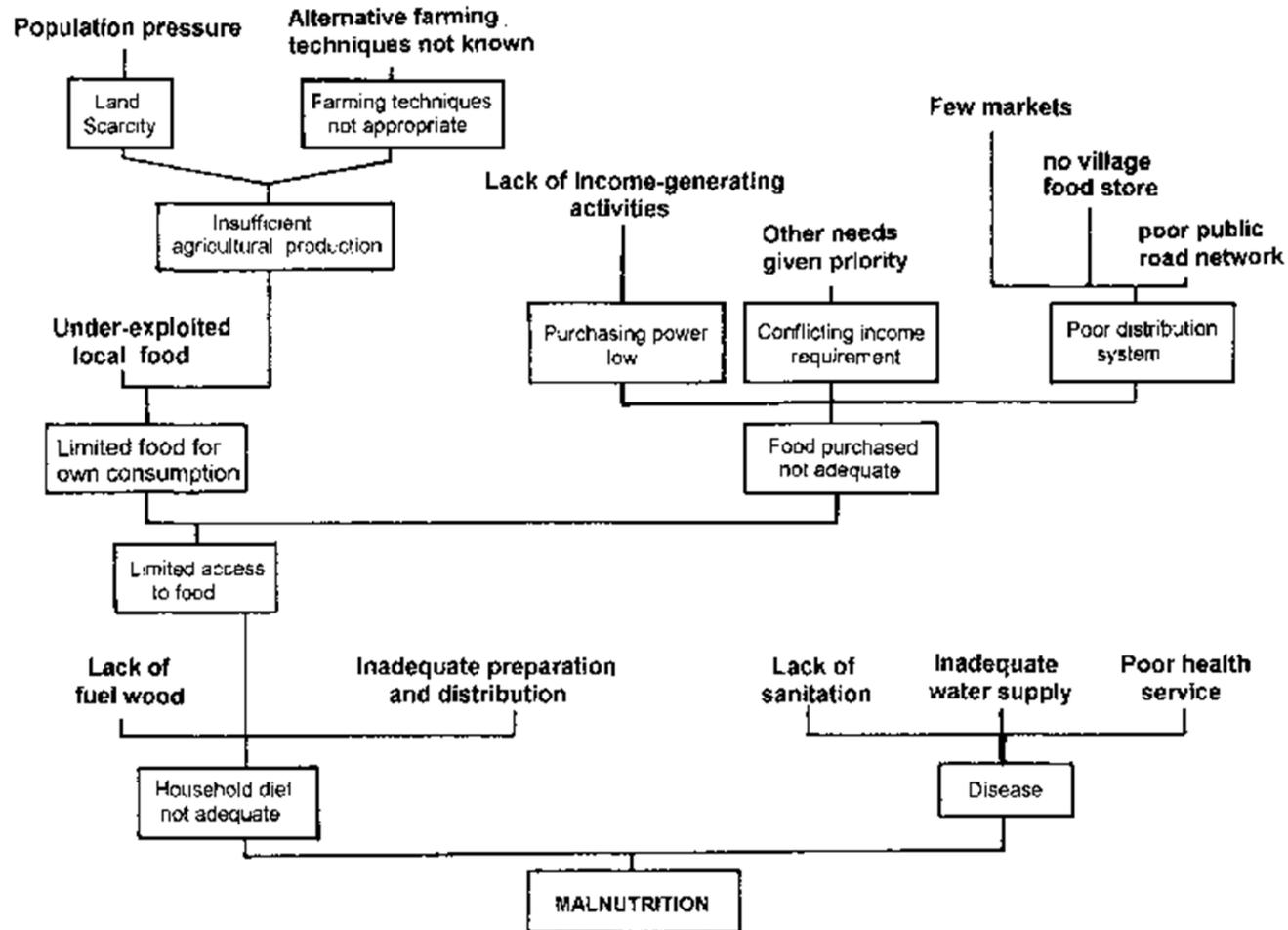
IDENTIFYING NUS IN YOUR AREA

Are There Possible Non-Local NUS That Might Be Useful and Appropriate for Your Focus Area?

- Are there any particular non-local underutilized crops that might grow well under local environmental conditions?
- Would such crops be adopted by local growers and consumers?
- How might these crops be located, imported, and evaluated?

*Introducing plant species

Understanding Local Food Security: Getting to the Root of the Problem



Problem and Solution Trees (PRA Technique)



FIELD WORK

Market Surveys



With knowledgeable persons, survey local markets to determine the availability of different types of major crops as well as underutilized crops.



mountain date palm - *Phoenix loureiro*

Surveying Local Foods and Ingredients



- Talk with families, especially the cooks, to determine what is being consumed locally.
- Food preferences are difficult, if not impossible, to change. For example, in parts of SE Asia, dairy foods are non traditional and not likely to be widely consumed or particularly welcomed. But new types of leafy greens may gain acceptance fairly readily (although diets are already quite rich in leafy greens).

Farm and Garden Surveys



Local farmers and gardeners will be your most valuable resources in determining which underutilized crops are being grown; and whether any new crops might be useful or welcome.

Swapping Seeds



Informal seed sharing or organized seed fairs are great ways to both inventory seeds of possible underutilized crops and to access such plant material for promotion among other farmers.

Avoiding Misinterpretation in the Field

Possible flawed assumptions by outside development workers and experts:

- There are no really viable local crops (otherwise, why is the local population so poor, underfed, etc.?)
- Local food sources are generally inferior and must be replaced.
- Locals do not garden (“We saw no vegetables growing around their homes.”)



Community-Based Surveys

Rely on persons with local knowledge to help interpret the information.



Is it a Wild Food, a Crop, or Both?

- An estimated 1.6 billion people rely on forests for their livelihoods (FAO).
- Wild foods, from forests, swamps, lakes, and streams are a key component of diets throughout the developing world.
- Some of these foods are also semi-domesticated, being grown in farms, gardens, and waterways.
- Surveys may need to determine if such foods are only found in the wild or perhaps cultivated.
- Development projects might explore the possibility of promoting certain wild foods for cultivation.



A photograph of a dense field of green plants, likely a crop field, with a central text overlay. The plants are in various stages of growth, with some showing signs of insect damage. The text is centered and reads "NUS PLANT PROFILES".

NUS PLANT PROFILES

The pods



Moringa (*M. oleifera*), or drumstick tree, is another naturalized perennial vegetable. Both the tender, young pods and leaf shoots are edible with pods being available during the dry season and leaves harvestable during the rainy season.



Pods and leaf shoots are added to curries whereas leaves are steamed for dipping and also added to soups.

The leaves



Acacia pennata, known locally as *cha-om* or *pak lat*, is another common source of leafy vegetables. Tender leaf shoots are produced over much of the year, also providing greens during the dry months.

The leaves



Acacia pennata leaf shoots are commonly produced in home gardens and easily located in markets. They are usually eaten as raw dipping vegetables, fried with eggs or cooked in curries.

The leaves



Mango (*Mangifera indica*) is one of the most common fruit trees of northern Thailand. New, tender, raw leaves produced during the mid-late dry season are used to dip pepper sauces, larb (a dry curry) or added to salads.

The leaves



Tamarind (*Tamarind indica*) grows throughout the tropics and is valued in northern Thailand, as elsewhere, for its pulpy pods.



Additionally, the tender leaf shoots and flowers are added to soups as well as curries for a sour flavor.

The Leaves



A non-woody perennial, *pak nam* (*Lasia spinosa*) grows in moist places such as creek banks.



Harvested year round in the wild or semi-nurtured on farm wetlands, the leaves and stems of *pak nam* (Thai for “spiny vegetable”) are blanched for dipping and included in curries. It is sometimes found in local markets.

The leaves



A clump of fiddlehead fern in a home garden.

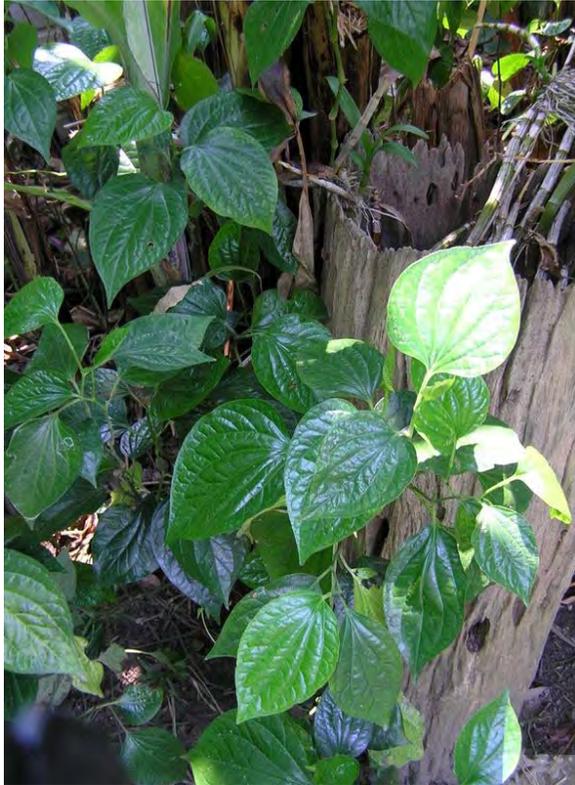
The tender shoots and fronds are stir fried, curried and blanched or eaten raw as a dipping vegetable.

Fiddlehead fern (*Athyrium esculentum*) is another herbaceous perennial native to northern Thailand. Commonly found in the wild along stream banks, this fern is also cultivated as a minor crop.



Edible fiddlehead fern shoots and fronds.

The leaves



The tender new leaves of this non-climbing pepper are eaten raw as a dipping vegetable or used as an edible wrapper for a local treat called *miang kham*. They're also added to curries.

Leaf pepper (*piper sarmentosum*), also a non-woody perennial indigenous to the forests of Thailand, is valued as both a food source and an ornamental ground cover.



Fresh leaves in the market



miang kham

The flowers



Snowflake tree foliage



Edible snowflake tree flowers.

The indigenous snowflake tree (*Trevesia palmata*) grows naturally in moist forest, but also thrives in home gardens.

Although the small tree produces edible young leaves, which are produced year round, the snowflake tree is best known for edible flowers that emerge during the cold season. These are included in curries.

The flowers



Sesbania (sesbanis grandiflora) is not native, but has been long adopted by people in this region for its edible flowers. The white-flower variety is generally preferred over the more bitter red flower type.



Sesbania flowers are most abundant during the end of the rainy season as well as the hot season. The flowers can be steamed or blanched for dipping or included in curries.

The flowers



Certain types of banana blossoms are edible, including the Thai cooking banana (*Musa acuminata x balbisiana*) and forest banana. The blossoms are eaten raw in salads, stir fried and curried.

The flowers



Kapok tree during the dry season.

The tree cotton or kapok tree (*Bombax ceiba*) is commonly encountered along northern Thai roadsides. During the dry season the deciduous trees produce bright orange flowers.

The flowers



The fallen flowers are collected and dried, many of which are marketed.



The dried flowers go into curries and a popular noodle dish.

The flowers



During the cold season this indigenous *Bauhinia* (*Bauhinia variegata*) produces edible, white flowers which are consumed by some ethnic groups.

The flowers



Multi-purpose neem (*Azadirachta indica*) hails from nearby India and Burma. Apart from timber and natural insecticidal value, steamed and blanched flowers and leaf shoots are enjoyed as a dipping vegetable.

The pods



Indigenous Indian trumpet (*Oroxylum indica*) has edible pods and flowers. Its tender young pods are harvested in the late rainy and early cold seasons and are roasted over a flame to remove the tough outer layer. The inner portion of the pod can be used to dip pepper sauce and larb. Otherwise, it is added to salads, fried with pork or curried.

The pods



Both tender, young pods and shoots of various naturalized *Leucaena* spp. are eaten raw as a dipping vegetable.



Hedges of *Leucaena* commonly surround home gardens in northern Thailand.

The shoots



Shoot of *Dendrocalamus giganteus*.

Bamboo shoots, available mainly during the rainy season, may be boiled for dipping, curried or stir fried.

Dozens of bamboo species, most of which indigenous, are found in northern Thailand. Besides offering important construction materials, the shoots of many types of bamboo, such as giant bamboo (*Dendrocalamus giganteus*), play a major role in the local diet.



Bamboo shoots for sale in the market.

The shoots



Chopping a mature shoot from a rattan clump.



The rattan shoot with the thorny bark trimmed off.

Although numerous rattan species are indigenous to northern Thailand, they are increasingly rare in the wild. Most famous as canes used for weaving baskets and wicker furniture, these thorny palms also have shoots with an edible core.

The thorny outer bark of large shoots can be trimmed off to access the core. The bitter cores are sometimes eaten raw as a dipping vegetable, roasted and added to dipping sauces or cooked in curries.

The hearts



The multi-trunk red fishtail palm (*Caryota mitis*).

Fishtail palms (*Caryota spp.*) are also native to Thailand. Though increasingly rare in the wild, the species has gained popularity as an ornamental plant.



The edible heart of red fishtail palm.

Unlike rattan palms, the fishtail palm lacks thorns. The outer bark is removed to access the sweet, edible heart that's cooked in curries.

A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a green plant stem. The stem has several large, heart-shaped green leaves with serrated edges. Some leaves show signs of insect damage, with small holes and irregular white patches. A thin, white, curly tendril is visible extending from the stem. At the top of the stem, there is a small, green, developing flower bud. The background is filled with more green foliage.

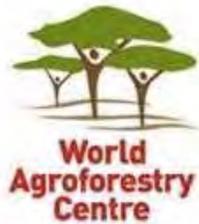
NUS RESOURCES

Where to Start: Using What is Already Available

- The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations offers a tremendous wealth of technical resources covering a wide range of food production topics, particularly for the developing world.
- Use the search engine of the FAO homepage to locate possible resources for underutilized crops in particular regions of the world.



Where to Start: Using What is Already Available



CGAIR (Consultative Groups on International Agriculture Research) is an international organization which funds and co-ordinates research into agricultural crop breeding with the goal of “reducing rural poverty, increasing food security, improving human health and nutrition, and ensuring more sustainable management of natural resources.”

CGAIR has a network of 15 research centers, of which those most likely to have some focus on underutilized crops include:

- Bioversity International
- International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA)
- International Center for Forestry Research (Bogor, Indonesia)
- International Crop Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics
- International Center for Tropical Agriculture
- World Agroforestry Center (ICRAF)

Where to Start: Using What is Already Available

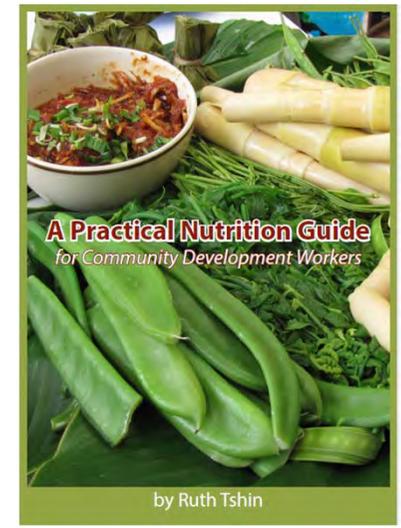
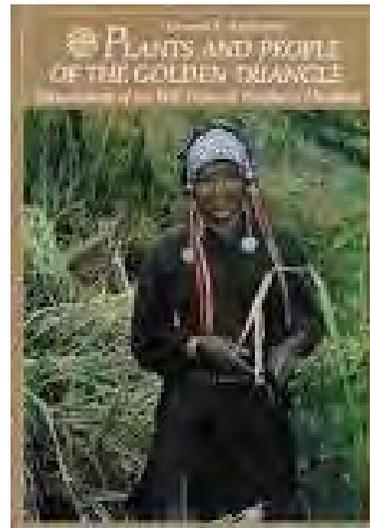
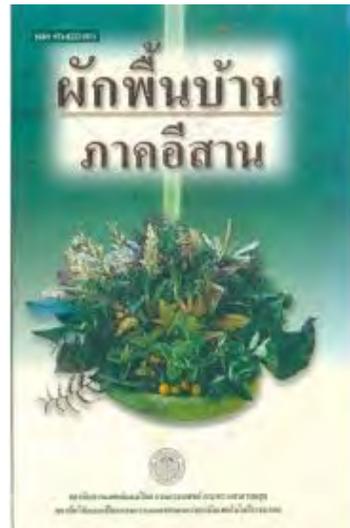
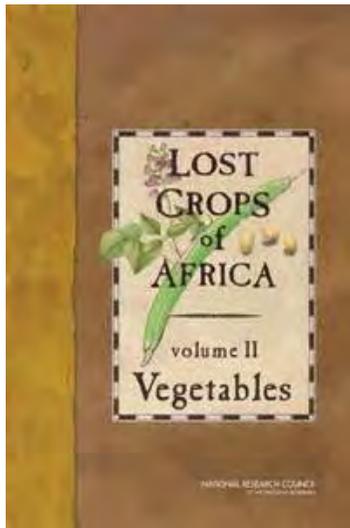


AVRDC

The World Vegetable Center

- The World Vegetable Center is committed to alleviating poverty and malnutrition in the developing world through the increased production and consumption of nutritious and health-promoting vegetables.
- Founded in 1971 with a mandate to work in tropical Asia with its headquarters campus in Taiwan open in October 1973.
- As the Center gained expertise and capacity, it expanded into sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, and South Asia. In 2008, the organization adopted a new name – AVRDC – The World Vegetable Center – to reflect its global scope.

Resources: Local/Regional Reference Books



Look for authoritative regional publications.

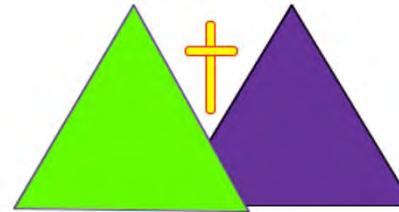
Do not forget to consult guides in local/regional languages.

Resources: Local Experts

- Regional, natural, and local contacts with underutilized crop expertise
- National or local universities
- Local governmental agencies
- Non-governmental organizations



Cambodia Department of Agriculture



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