

THE CHAYA



Scientific name: Cnidoscolus aconitifolius. Among the most common varieties in El Salvador are chayamansa, multilobus, and aconitifolia.

Is it possible to find a plant that heals the soil, nourishes the body, and withstands the harshest droughts? The answer lies in chaya, an ancestral shrub that has sustained Mesoamerican communities for centuries and stands today as a cornerstone of modern agroecology.

Often called "Maya tree spinach," chaya is much more than a wild food. It is a living superfood capable of thriving in poor soils where other crops fail, offering an abundant source of protein, iron, and vitamins without the need for synthetic agrochemicals.

Chaya is propagated through stem cuttings and grows very quickly. Within 3 months, its leaves are ready for harvest, and it adapts well to all soil types.





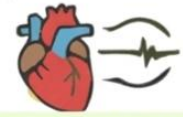
You must wash, chop, and boil chaya leaves with salt for 10 to 20 minutes before eating them. It is essential **NOT TO USE** aluminum cookware, as chaya reacts with this material and produces a toxic substance.

Chaya is highly valued for its nutritional properties, as it nutritionally outperforms most other leafy green vegetables.

Chaya and Its Benefits



More protein than spinach, Swiss chard, and lettuce



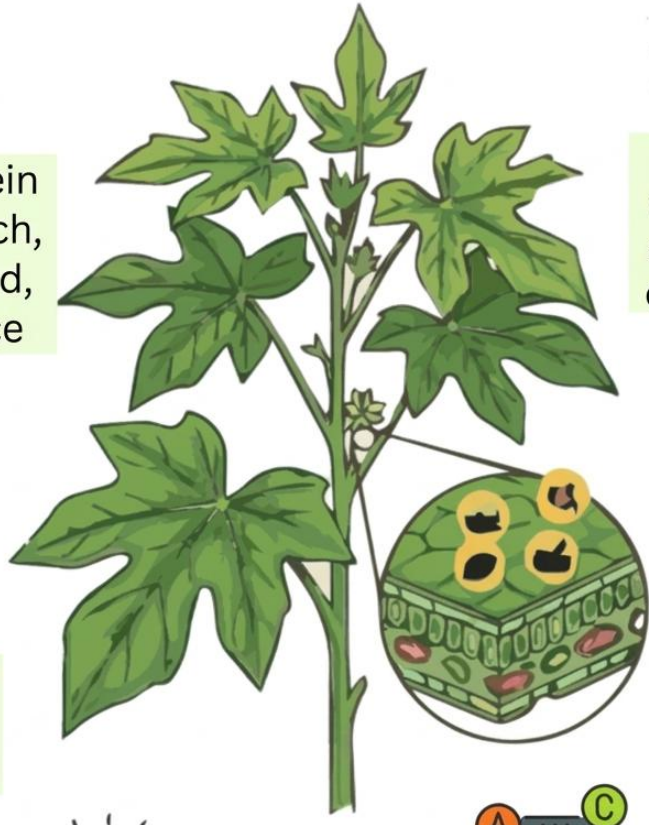
Improves circulation and lowers cholesterol



Boosts the immune system



Increases calcium in the bones





Helps keep the mind active



Rich in iron and vitamins

Keep in mind that chaya leaves are very rich in protein, calcium, iron, carotenes (which improve eyesight), and vitamins A, B, and C.

Chaya Nutritional Information

Chaya leaves stand out for their high nutritional value and functional potential in sustainable diets (Table 1).

Table 1. Nutritional Information of Chaya

Key Nutrients	Content 1/
Protein	5.7 g.
Carbohydrates	4.2 g.
Fats (o Fat)	0.4 g.
Iron	11.4 mg.
Calcium	199.4 mg.
Vitamin C	164.7 mg.
Potassium	217.2 mg.
Phosphorus	39.0 mg.
Beta-carotene	0.085 mg.

1/ Values calculated based on a 100-gram serving of chaya.
Source: Compilations from the international organization ECHOcommunity. (Educational Concerns for Hunger Organization)

In addition to all these benefits: chaya also helps regulate glucose levels (supporting people with diabetes), cholesterol, and uric acid. It acts as a digestive tonic, diuretic, and detoxifying agent.

Additional tips to get the most out of chaya's benefits:

• "The Boiling Effect": Boiling chaya for 15 to 20 minutes provides a dual metabolic benefit:

• Up to 99.9% of harmful compounds are eliminated, making it completely safe to eat.

• Cell walls and bonds with antinutrients are broken down, "unlocking" minerals and proteins so your digestive system can absorb them effectively.

• The cooking water becomes infused with nutrients. If you have boiled it for more than 15 minutes, you can use this infusion as a tea or a base for soups.

Step-by-Step Recipes for a Healthy Life.

Chaya is a nutritional treasure of Mesoamerican cuisine. Let's explore simple, delicious dishes for healthy eating. Dare to make and try them!

Rice with Chaya



Ingredients

1 bunch of chaya

2 cups of rice

1 head of garlic

Instructions

Clean the chaya leaves, removing the stems and keeping only the tender leaves.

Boil the leaves in water for 5 minutes.

Drain the chaya and chop it, reserving the cooking water.

Cook the rice in the reserved chaya water.

In a skillet, heat some oil with a clove of garlic. After 2 minutes, add the chopped chaya and the cooked

Recipe recovered from cookpad.com

Italian Pasta with Chaya



Ingredients

200 g (7 oz) short pasta

12 finely chopped chaya leaves

1 ½ cups chopped spinach

¼ onion

½ teaspoon garlic powder

½ teaspoon black pepper

½ cup cream

1 cup shredded cheese

3 tablespoons oil

Salt and pepper to taste

Instructions

Cook the pasta in plenty of salted water. Meanwhile, wash and chop the chaya and spinach.

In a skillet with oil, sauté the onion, then add the chaya. Once it begins to brown, add the spinach, garlic powder, salt, and pepper, followed by the cream.

Drain the pasta and add it to the vegetables along with the cheese. If needed, add a splash of the reserved pasta cooking water and toss together to create a creamy sauce.

Recipe recovered from cookpad.com

Aromatic Chicken with Chaya and Chipilín



Ingredients

4 pieces of chicken

Chipilín leaves
(Crotalaria longirostrata)

10 chaya leaves

Roasted peanuts

Grated cheese (or shredded cheese)

4 tablespoons olive oil

Salt and pepper to taste

1 tomato

¼ chopped onion (or sliced onion)

Instructions

In a skillet, sear the seasoned chicken pieces.

Add the chopped tomato and sliced onion.

In a food processor or blender, blend the chaya, chipilín, roasted peanuts, and cheese, then add the olive oil until smooth.

Pour the mixture over the chicken and top with the remaining cheese.

Roast at 300 °C (575 °F) for 12 minutes.

Recipe recovered from cookpad.com

Refreshing Chaya, Cucumber, and Lime Water



Important Note: Chaya must be pre-cooked or boiled for at least 5 to 10 minutes before consumption. DO NOT USE ALUMINUM COOKWARE. Drink it for 8 days, pause for 8 days, and then resume for another 8 days.

This drink is beneficial because it: a. Helps regulate blood sugar and cholesterol levels, b. Has detoxifying and diuretic properties, c. Strengthens the immune system, d. Supports digestive health by reducing abdominal bloating, e. Promotes cardiovascular health by helping maintain healthy blood pressure.

Ingredients

Chaya leaves: 2 leaves (pre-washed and pre-boiled).

Limes: 10 limes, halved (with peel).

Cucumber: 1 cucumber (half sliced with peel).

Water: 3 liters (approx. 12 ½ cups) total (500 ml / 2 cups for blending, and the rest to top off).

Instructions

Blend: Place the limes, pre-boiled chaya leaves, half of the cucumber, sugar (or sweetener to taste), and the 500 ml (2 cups) of water into a blender.

Strain: Pour the mixture through a fine-mesh strainer to remove any pulp or solids.

Mix: Transfer the strained liquid into a large pitcher and add the remaining water.

Serve: Serve over ice and garnish with the cucumber slices.

Recipe recovered from cocina-casera.com

Air-Dried Beef with Chaya



Ingredients

2 ½ pounds (approx. 1.1 kg) air-dried beef, cut into medium-sized pieces

1 red onion

4 chopped tomatoes

3 sliced pipián squashes *(small green summer squashes)*

1 head of garlic

10 clean, pre-cooked chaya leaves

Instructions

Blend the tomatoes, red onion, and garlic cloves until smooth to make a sauce.

Place the air-dried beef pieces in a bowl, add enough water to cover them completely, and let them soak for 30 minutes to remove excess salt. Drain the beef and rinse the pieces well.

Place a pot over heat with 1 ½ liters (approx. 6 cups) of water. Once it comes to a boil, add the air-dried beef pieces, the pre-cooked chaya leaves, the sliced pipián squashes, and the blended sauce.

Let everything simmer for 20 minutes, or until the beef is tender. Taste and adjust the seasoning if needed.

Serve the air-dried beef with chaya in deep bowls alongside warm corn tortillas.

Recipe recovered from laroussecocina.mx

Fish Soup with Chaya



Note: You can also add chaya to chicken or hen soup.

Ingredients

1 tomato

1 green bell pepper

½ onion

1 clove of garlic

3 alcapate leaves *(culantro / sawtooth coriander)*

1 pound (approx. 450 g) fish

10 clean, pre-boiled chaya leaves

Salt and pepper to taste

2 eggs

Instructions

Wash and chop the tomato, onion, green bell pepper, and garlic clove, and sauté them in a pot with oil or butter.

Pour in 2 ½ cups of water, add the chaya leaves, and let it simmer over low heat for 5 minutes *(note: ensure leaves are pre-boiled for at least 10 to 15 minutes total for safety)*.

Once the leaves are cooked, season with salt and pepper to taste, and add the alcapate leaves along with the cleaned fish pieces. Boil for a maximum of 3 minutes.

Crack 2 eggs directly into the soup, cook for 1 minute, and it is ready to serve.

Optional: Stir in heavy cream or seafood soup mix

Récipe from Walter Santillana, San Pedro Puxtla, Ahuachapán Sur, El Salvador.

Chaya Pupusas



Ingredients

10 clean, cooked, and chopped chaya leaves

2 pounds (approx. 900 g) corn masa *(corn dough)*

½ chopped onion

1 pound (approx. 450 g) quesillo *(Salvadoran melting cheese or shredded mozzarella)*

Salt to taste

Instructions

In a bowl, combine the chopped chaya leaves with the chopped onion.

Add the quesillo and salt to taste, and knead the mixture well so the chaya leaves integrate evenly into the cheese.

Shape the corn masa into pupusas filled with the chaya and cheese mixture, and cook them on a griddle *(comal)* over medium heat.

Serve hot and accompany with *curtido* (pickled cabbage slaw) and tomato salsa to taste.

Récipe from Maricruz Mártir, San Pedro Puxtla, Ahuachapán Sur, El Salvador.

Salvadoran Potato and Chaya Turnovers



Ingredients

1 pound (approx. 450 g) corn masa *(corn dough)*

½ pound (approx. 225 g) diced potatoes

5 cooked and chopped chaya leaves

Oil (for sautéing and frying)

¼ chopped onion

1 minced clove of garlic

Annatto *(achiote)* to color the masa

Instructions

In a saucepan, sauté the diced potatoes with the onion, garlic, and salt to taste for 1 minute. Add ¼ cup of water and cook until the potatoes are tender.

Transfer the cooked potatoes to a bowl, let them cool slightly, and mix in the pre-cooked, chopped chaya leaves.

Mix 1 teaspoon of annatto *(achiote)* into the corn masa and knead until the dough is evenly colored.

Shape the masa into turnovers filled with the potato and chaya mixture, and fry them in a pan with plenty of oil until golden and cooked through.

Serve hot and accompany with *curtido* (pickled cabbage slaw) and tomato salsa to taste.

Récipe from María Milagros Ramírez, San Pedro Puxtla, Ahuachapán Sur, El Salvador.

Chilaquiles with Cheese and Chaya



Ingredients

Corn tortillas

3 eggs

½ pound (approx. 225 g) quesillo *(Salvadoran melting cheese or shredded mozzarella)*

5 cooked and chopped chaya leaves

Oil (for frying)

Tomato sauce *(or mild tomato salsa)*

Instructions

Cut the corn tortillas in half and gently slice open a pocket in the middle of each half.

Stuff each tortilla pocket with the quesillo and the pre-cooked, chopped chaya leaves.

In a bowl, beat the eggs until frothy.

Dip the stuffed tortillas into the beaten eggs to coat them well, and fry them in a pan with hot oil until golden brown.

In a pot, pour in the tomato sauce, add the egg-coated stuffed tortillas, and let them simmer for 5 minutes.

Serve hot and accompany with a fresh salad or vegetables to taste

Récipe from María Milagros Ramírez, San Pedro Puxtla, Ahuachapán Sur, El Salvador.

The future is sown in community.

The journey with chaya does not end on these pages; it is just beginning in your garden, your kitchen, and your community. Every cutting planted and every recipe shared is a firm step toward food sovereignty and the regeneration of our land.

La Agroecology flourishes when we share knowledge. We want to hear about your experience growing chaya and see photos of your first harvests!

Let's keep cultivating change together!

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Facebook Page: /Fundesyram

YouTube Videos: @videosFundesyram

Online Guides: https://fundesyram.info/

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