

AJO COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE



Spring 2009 / Week 11 of 13

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Planned harvest: Quelites (Amaranth Greens), I'toi Onions, French Breakfast Radishes, Summer Squash, Wheat Berries, Oranges, Green Tomatoes, Red LaSoda Potatoes.

Amaranth Greens?

Also known as “pigweed”, amaranth greens, both wild and cultivated, are a delicious option for summer greens in the Sonoran Desert. Amaranth grain and leaves were cultivated and eaten in Mexico as early as 7,000 years ago. By the time of the Aztecs, thousands of hectares of amaranth were planted. Grains were used not only for food but also in religious ceremonies, mixing it with the human blood of sacrificial victims and molding it into figurines. When the Spanish arrived, they decided that human sacrifice must stop, and thus amaranth cultivation was suppressed. Amaranth however survived in pockets across Mexico, and especially on both sides of the modern US-Mexico border, where native tribes continue to cultivate it as well as harvest the native wild varieties. In the meanwhile, travelers brought the seeds all over the world, and amaranth in different varieties has been developed into an important food resource; according to one study, leafy amaranths may be the most widely grown vegetable in the humid tropics (*The Tumbleweed Gourmet*, 1987).

Its English name comes from the Greek *amarantus*, meaning ‘never fading’, referring to its beautiful flower. Around this part of the world, it is often referred to as quelites (Spanish for “greens” which includes all wild edible greens) and has been an important food source for desert dwellers in the lean times; the wild variety *Amaranthus palmeri* called *chuhukkia* ‘*iiwaki*’ by the Tohono O’odham sprouts after the first summer rains, after months of drought (and before the next crop) and quickly produces a lush carpet of edible greens. In *Gathering the Desert*, Gary Nabhan writes how in the eighteenth century, Jesuit Miguel del Barco recorded with amazement of seeing the Pericu, natives of Baja California, going down on all fours, “setting themselves to graze like beasts (...) nipping off the top of the amaranth, and eating it, saving the work of taking it by the hand to their mouth.” Amaranth greens are even today considered by some to be “the meat of the poor people”; however, to this day it is cherished not only for its exceptional nutritional value (extremely high values of vitamins A and C, calcium, iron, niacin and folic acid) but for its taste too: the great explorer Carl Lumholz wrote of the culinary quality of amaranth as “being superior in taste to spinach, resembling more in flavor fresh asparagus.”



Today, many wild species and cultivated subspecies are grown all over the world. According to Nabhan, they are generally harvested when young, about a hand’s breadth tall (ca. 20 cm); at that size, young stalks and leaves can be used raw in salads or cooked, like any other greens, i.e. sautéed, steamed, or chopped and put into egg dishes, soups, stews and casseroles. They go well with garlic, cumin, sesame seeds or oil, onion, tomatoes and even allspice. Like spinach, amaranth greens contain some oxalic acid which might inhibit the absorption of calcium and zinc, and the nitrates in the leaves can be converted to nitrites. No clear data is available on how much danger to health this poses; however it seems that unusually large amounts of amaranth greens (or spinach or chard) would have to be consumed for such negative effects to occur. If you are concerned, take care to avoid reheating the cooked amaranth greens, particularly for consumption by small children.

The amaranth season is notoriously short; not even a month passes from the first amaranth sprouts to gorgeous flowers. Once wild amaranth plants start flowering, and grow beyond edibility, they bring on a completely different nuisance: allergies. The flowers shed hundreds of thousands of pollen grains per plant, and if you are allergic, it will irritate your nose, eyes, skin, throat and lungs.

RECIPES ETC.

On Saturday, May 9, as part of National Women's Health Week, a healthy cooking demonstration was held at the Ajo Community Center with Cheralyn Schmidt of the U of A Pima County Extension Office, featuring produce donated by Crooked Sky Farms. A sampling of the fare:

Root Vegetable Salad with Lemon Citranette (by Cheralyn Schmidt) Serves 6-8

1/4 cup lemon juice
3 Tbsp honey
1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil
1 Tbsp chopped parsley
1 tsp lemon zest
1/2 tsp fresh cracked black pepper
1/4 tsp sea salt (less or more to taste)
1/2 cup grated carrot
1/2 cup grated radish
1/2 cup grated beets
1/2 lb spring greens or chopped tender lettuce

In a small bowl, whisk together lemon juice and honey. While whisking constantly, pour olive oil slowly in a thin stream until well blended. Stir in parsley, lemon zest, pepper and salt. In a large bowl, combine vegetables. Pour dressing over veggies and toss gently until coated. Serve immediately.

Southwestern Sunday Frittata (by Cheralyn Schmidt) Serves 6-8

4 slices thick cut bacon, chopped
3/4 cup chopped onion
8 large eggs
1 Tbsp chopped garlic
3/4 cup chopped tomatoes, drained
1/2 cup corn
1/4 cup cilantro
1/2 tsp salt
1/2 tsp fresh cracked pepper, or crushed red pepper

Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. Grease an 8 inch square baking pan and set aside. In a large sauté pan over medium high heat, sauté bacon and onion together until brown and bacon is crisp. Turn off

heat. In a large bowl, whisk together eggs and garlic until blended. Fold in remainder of ingredients and bacon mixture. Pour into a prepared pan and bake for 30-35 minutes until set. Remove from oven, cut into squares and serve hot or at room temperature.



Pasta Salad with Roasted Garlic, Chrysanthemum Greens and Artichokes (by Cheralyn Schmidt)

1/2 cup raw, chopped artichokes
2 Tbsp red wine vinegar, divided in recipe
3 Tbsp extra virgin olive oil, divided in recipe
2 cups chopped chrysanthemum greens
3 Tbsp roasted garlic puree
3 Tbsp water
1/2 tsp sea salt
1/2 tsp fresh cracked black pepper
1 lb cooked pasta
10-15 basil leaves, chiffonade
1/4 cup thinly sliced green onions
1/2 cup finely grated parmesan cheese

Toss artichokes in a teaspoon of red wine vinegar to keep them from turning brown while cooking. Preheat a large sauté pan or Dutch oven over medium high heat. Pour in 1 Tbsp of the olive oil and toss in artichokes. Cook until slightly softened, 3-5 minutes. Stir in greens and cook for an additional 2 minutes until bright green and tender. Turn off heat then stir cooked pasta, basil and green onions into contents of pan. In a small bowl, whisk together remainder of vinegar, oil, garlic puree, water, salt and pepper until smooth. Pour over pasta and veggies and toss to coat. Garnish with parmesan cheese. Serve hot or room temperature.