

Chaya—*Cnidoscolus chayamansa* McVaugh¹

James M. Stephens²

Chaya is a little known leafy green vegetable of dry regions of the tropics. The name comes from the Mayan *chay*. Other common names are tree spinach, chaya col, kikilchay, and chaykeken. The genus *Cnidoscolus* consists of 40 or more species, but only *chayamansa* refers to the vegetable chaya .

Chaya was introduced into Cuba, and from there into Florida. In south Florida it is often found as a rank shrub, but seldom is appreciated for its food value as a vegetable.

Description

Chaya is a large leafy shrub reaching a height of about 6 to 8 feet. It somewhat resembles a vigorous hibiscus plant or the cassava plant. The dark green leaves are alternate, simple, slick surfaced with some hairs, and palmately lobed (much like the leaves of okra). Each leaf is 6 to 8 inches across and is borne on a long slender petiole (leaf stem). Where the leaf stem connects to the leaf, the leaf veins are fleshy and cuplike.

Chaya blooms frequently, and both male and female flowers are borne together at the end of long flower stems. Both kinds of flowers are small, less than 10 mm long. The white male flowers are much more abundant. In the fall trials at Gainesville, FL, seed pods about 1-inch wide and the size of walnuts were produced. These were similar to those on cassava.

The wood of young stems is soft, easily broken, and susceptible to rot. When cut, the stem exudes a white latex. Stinging hairs are usually found on the young stem.



Figure 1. Chaya leaf
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Wild chaya is rarely eaten because of its stinging hairs. Cultivated varieties differ in the degree of lobing of the leaves, the size of the leaf, and quantity of the stinging hairs. Pig chaya is one of the very best eating varieties. It has small leaves, with three shallow lobes and almost no spines. The type found in Florida has five lobes.

Culture

Chaya is cold sensitive and should be started at the beginning of a warm season. Thick woody stem cuttings about 6 to 12 inches long are used, but they root slowly. Cuttings

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2. James M. Stephens, professor emeritus, Horticultural Sciences Department; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

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can be established in the soil if the soil is well drained. Early growth is slow, but after the first year the plants may be pruned and leaves may be harvested, resulting in rapid new growth. Up to 60% or more of the leaves may be removed at harvest, with enough left for healthy new growth. Since most gardeners need only a few leaves at a time, one plant harvested on a continuous basis is adequate.

Use

The use of gloves during harvesting is suggested to protect the hands from spines. Younger leaves and a bit of the stems are cut and used much like spinach. Large leaves are cut into manageable pieces before cooking. Leaves are immersed and simmered for 20 minutes and then served with oil or butter.

Chaya is a good source of protein, vitamins, calcium, and iron. However, **raw chaya leaves are highly poisonous**. They contain a high content of hydrocyanic acid. In this respect chaya is similar to cassava. With chaya, 1 minute of boiling destroys most of the acid.