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# 30 Indigenous Crops Promoting Health and Contributing to Food Security



Food Tank has compiled a list of indigenous fruits, vegetables, and grains from across the globe, which may improve health while contributing to environmental sustainability.

Joseph Simcox

According to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), just twelve crops provide 75 percent (<http://www.fao.org/docrep/007/y5609e/y5609e02.htm>) of the world's food. Three of these crops, rice, maize, and wheat contribute to nearly 60 percent of the protein and calories obtained by humans from plants. Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some 75 percent (<http://www.fao.org/docrep/007/y5609e/y5609e02.htm>) of plant genetic diversity has been lost.

Restoring interest and investment in indigenous crops may offer a solution to food insecurity and the increasing loss of biodiversity. Some traditional plant varieties can help improve nutrition and health, improve local economies, create resilience to climate change, revitalize agricultural biodiversity, and help preserve tradition and culture.

For example, the World Vegetable Center (AVRDC)'s Vegetable Genetic Resources System (<http://203.64.245.173/search.asp>) and Slow Food International's Ark of Taste (<http://www.slowfoodfoundation.com/ark#risultati>) are working to catalog indigenous species of fruits and vegetables around the world. And Bioversity International (<http://www.bioversityinternational.org/>), a research organization in Italy, is delivering scientific evidence, management practices, and policy options to use and safeguard biodiversity among trees and agriculture to achieve sustainable global food and nutrition security.

Botanical Explorer Joseph Simcox (<http://explorewithjoseph.com/>) travels around the world, documenting and tasting thousands of crops. He traverses the wilderness, interviews villagers, and searches markets across the globe for rare and indigenous crops. Joseph helps preserve species and varieties that are in danger of extinction, improving biodiversity and distributing rare seeds (<http://www.growrareseeds.com>) to the public.

Food Tank has compiled 31 indigenous fruits, vegetables, and grains from many regions across the globe. These foods are not only good for the environment, but delicious, too!

## **AFRICA**

1. Bambara Bean: This tropical African bean is highly nutritious and resilient to high temperatures and dry conditions. The versatile seeds from this hardy plant are used in traditional African dishes, boiled as a snack, produced as flour, and extracted for oil.
2. Cowpea: This legume is one of Africa's oldest known crops, and an estimated 200 million people depend on it as a staple. The cowpea can be beneficial for both human and environmental health, helping with the body's absorption and breakdown of other foods and enriching soils.
3. Finger Millet: This African native variety of millet is one of the most nutritious cereal crops in the world. It is high in protein, the amino acid methionine, and has the third highest iron content of any grain.
4. Gemsbok Cucumber: The vines of the Gemsbok cucumber can be seen throughout the sandy deserts of southern Africa. The fruits are a staple to the Kalahari Bushmen and other tribes. The hardy nature of the plant merits attention as a sub-tropical desert crop. The vines are pest-resilient, tenacious and serve as a great ground cover over baking hot sand or soil.
5. Lablab: The native sub-Saharan African legume is a versatile food staple and an ideal grazing crop for goats, cattle, sheep, and pigs. It can be used as a cover crop to repair degraded land and restore nitrogen to the soil.
6. Marama: Often referred to as the green gold of Africa, the marama plant produces edible seeds high in nutrition above ground, and a high-protein tuber below ground. It is native to the Kalahari Desert and serves as an important crop in the region where malnutrition and food insecurity are high.

7. Marula: The versatile native African fruit tree is found in 29 sub-Saharan countries. Fruit from the marula tree has four times as much vitamin C as orange juice and its kernels are rich in antioxidants. Leaves from the marula tree are used to feed livestock; wood is used for bowls, drums, and stools while the tree's bark has many medicinal qualities.

8. Safou: The safou tree is often referred to as the "butterfruit" for its rich and oily pulp. Native to the tropical forests of West and Central Africa, the safou is high in fats, calorie-dense, and rich in amino acids, micronutrients, and minerals.

## EUROPE

9. Ermelo Orange: These Portuguese, medium-sized oranges are known for being sweet and juicy. The thin rind is a distinctive feature of the fruit grown in the region overlooking the Lima River where pesticides, insecticides, and chemical fertilizers are forbidden.

10. Formby Asparagus: Formby asparagus is white at its base, green at its stem, and purple at its tip. Formby, a town near Liverpool, England, was once revered for the award-winning asparagus grown on its fine, sandy soil. The vegetable is high in protein, fiber, vitamin B6, calcium, magnesium, and zinc. It also aids in protein synthesis, reduces calcium loss, and has antioxidant properties.

11. Målselvnepe Turnip: This distinct and strong-tasting turnip is considered a delicacy in northern Norway, where it is often consumed raw in addition to being used as an ingredient in stews, soups, and stir-fries. The hardy plant is high in vitamin C and potassium.

12. Perinaldo Artichokes: This unique thistle vegetable, also known as the French violet, is native to the Mediterranean region and was originally cultivated in ancient Greece. Perinaldo, a small Italian town in the far west of Liguria, is known for the production of the artichokes, which have no spines or choke and are violet in color. The edible flower bud is a good source of fiber, vitamin C, folic acid, and various minerals. This variety of artichoke is tolerant of cold temperature and drought and very hardy.

## ASIA

13. Bitter Melon: Originally from the Indian subcontinent, the tropical and subtropical vine is grown largely throughout Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean for its edible fruit, which is extremely bitter. It is used in traditional medicine to relieve diabetes, and for the treatment of respiratory illnesses, wounds, skin diseases, and rheumatism.

14. Corchorus olitorius: This native shrub of the Philippines is the primary source of jute fiber. The leaves and young fruits are used as a vegetable and the dried leaves as a tea and soup thickener.

15. Jackfruit: Native to South and Southeast Asia, it is believed to have originated in present-day Goa, India. The jackfruit tree can produce between 100 and 200 large fruits a year, which are rich in vitamin C and protein.

Jackfruit is hardy and requires very little maintenance while being resistant to pests and high temperatures.

16. Lemongrass: This widely used culinary herb is found in many Asian countries, including India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnamese, Malaysia, Cambodia, and Indonesia. Its subtle, citrus flavor is used in soups, teas, and curries. Lemongrass is high in minerals and essential vitamins, which help control blood pressure and prevent heart disease. It is also used for its essential oils, which possess anti-microbial, anti-fungal, antioxidant, and anti-septic properties.

17. Mungbean: The mungbean is native to the Indian subcontinent and cultivated today in India, China, and Southeast Asia, as well as in hot, dry regions in the Southern United States and Southern Europe. It is a key component of Asian diets and is valuable for its easily digestible protein. Its high levels of iron help improve the diets of the most vulnerable women and children while also fixing nitrogen in the soil, making it valuable for crop rotations.

18. Pomelo: This large citrus fruit native to Southeast Asia tastes like a sweet, mild grapefruit, and is often used in desserts, salads, drinks, and marmalades.

19. Rambutan: This red, tropical fruit is native to Southeast Asia and closely related to the lychee. The plant, which is also grown in the Caribbean and Africa, is used for its fruit, leaves, bark, and seeds, which are thought to have medicinal qualities.

20. Taro: This popular culinary plant is known for its root starch and leaves. It originated in southern Asia, but is now also recognized as a staple of African, Oceanic, and South Asian cuisines, and is gaining popularity in the western world.

## **AUSTRALIA AND OCEANIA**

21. Bunya Nut: Bunya nuts have been consumed for generations by Australian Aboriginals. The nut is similar to the chestnut both in appearance and taste. The nuts grow on the enormous pines in the few rainforest regions of Australia, but these trees are becoming harder to find as a result of deforestation.

22. Kumara: The large, sweet, tuber is cultivated on many Pacific Islands and was a staple crop for hundreds of years. The vegetable is rich in complex carbohydrates and beta-carotene and a great source of protein, vitamins A and C, iron, calcium, and dietary fiber.

23. Lifou Island Taro: This taro plant, which is native to New Caledonia, has large leaves and sturdy stalks, which provide a key source of starch for many of the Pacific populations. The plant is high in calcium, iron, and protein.

24. Lifou Island Yam: This starchy tuber plays an important role in both nutrition and food security in many Pacific Island nations. The vegetable can be roasted, fried, grilled, boiled, smoked, or grated. Yams can be stored for a

long time, and the vegetable has a social and cultural significance on many islands.

25. Perry Pear: This formerly wild variety of pears, otherwise inedible, is pressed for its juice. The pear juice is then transformed into a fermented alcoholic beverage, which can be either sparkling or still. The English introduced the perry pear to Australia, but its production is still very limited, and many of the perry pear varieties are critically endangered.

## AMERICAS

26. Chayote: The chayote has been cultivated in Mexico for hundreds of years. The fruit, stems, and young leaves and tuber portions of the roots are eaten as a vegetable, both alone and plain boiled, and as an ingredient of numerous stews. The fruit is often used in children's food, juices, sauces, and pasta dishes because of its softness.

27. Coconillo: This tropical relative of the Tomato has a large range in tropical South America. The Coconillo is sweet like a cherry, with the same savory flavor of a tomato. The tart, juicy fruits are commonly used to make beverages, and often used in pepper sauces and relishes served with meat or fish. Plants do not seem to be cultivated; rather the locals harvest the fruits off of wild plants.

28. Sapote: The sapote is a fruit tree from the lower parts of Central America. Its fruit is often eaten raw, and flesh is used to make jams, ice cream, and sauces. In Costa Rica it is used as a linen starch and in Guatemala and El Salvador the seed is used as a skin tonic, to reduce muscular pain, and to treatment rheumatic illnesses.

29. Sweet Corn Root: This tuber, also known as the dale dale, has been cultivated for a long time by the indigenous people of the Amazon basin. It thrives in the tropical wetlands and could be a food source for millions around the world.

30. Woodland Sunflower: This relative of the common garden sunflower used to be a staple food of the Native American people. It is a vigorous and hardy plant, producing abundant tubers that can be cooked just like potatoes. Plants are naturally found in woodland fringes from Illinois to Maine.

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by Alexina Cather (<http://foodtank.com/biography/alexina-cather>)

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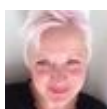
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