

# Food Plants International

Helping the hungry feed themselves well through being good stewards of God's amazing resources



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## Food plants for nutrition and health

A very insightful comment was made about 387 BC by Hippocrates when he said, "Let your food be your medicine and your medicine be your food." Somehow we have separated these to our own peril.

Many years ago on one of my visits to FAO in Rome, the head nutritionist insightfully and persuasively said not to get too technical and pre-occupied with food composition/nutrients (Nutritionism) and simply eat a rich diverse diet. Then not only will we get a balanced diet but often also receive the benefit of 'functional foods' or all the other benefits beyond simply the nutrients that plants contain. This is separate from plants that are purely medicinal.

Some plants that are commonly considered to have health and other benefits include: Bitter cucumber (*Momordica charantia*), Asian pennywort (*Centella asiatica*), Annas fruit such as soursop (*Annona muricata*), Stinging nettles (*Urtica dioica*), Sunset hibiscus (*Abelmoschus manihot*), Stevia (*Stevia rebaudiana*), Turmeric (*Curcuma longa*), Gingko (*Gingko biloba*), Evening primrose (*Oenothera biennis*), Echinacea (*Echinacea purpurea*) and many others.



*Curcuma longa*

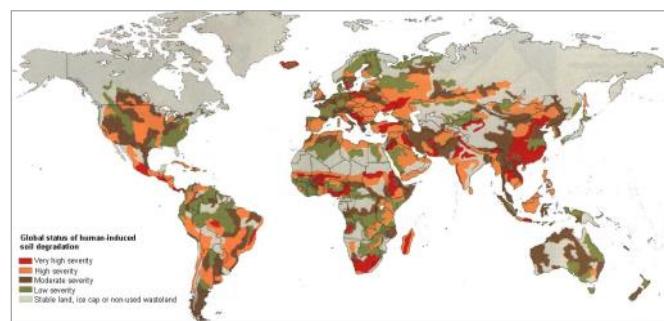


*Echinacea purpurea*



*Momordica*

Of course many plants have become depleted of nutrients and good food value by our plant breeding and our destructive and highly mechanized systems of agriculture. A good friend of mine was a stud sheep breeder and often his stud rams would become bow-legged due to selenium deficiency. (Which was corrected by selenium supplements.) For many years he persisted with specialists arguing that if the sheep on his property suffered selenium deficiency, then all the wheat produced on his property must also be selenium deficient. It took many years before the WAITE institute started to take his logic seriously, and now they openly acknowledge with thanks his persistence. Selenium is a key essential micronutrient for plant growth and in humans increases the body's resistance to disease. They now have PhD students looking at selenium deficiency and the occurrence of HIV in Africa. When I was in China, people working in Tibet were worried about Kasin-Beck disease (due to selenium and iodine deficiency) so I suggest they get in touch with the WAITE institute.



FAO soil degradation map

It is not only farmers who need to re-think their strategies. Cereals like wheat are richly nutritious but we pound it to pulp and then extract all the beneficial extra nutrients to end up with “white” flour. Chronic obesity is the result and is now the world’s major killer. As well, we push wheat production to the limits of its biome and then get alarmed at the high gluten content. There are many cereals adapted to hot arid lands that do not cause coeliacs disease.

Now we are continually confronted with people wanting a cure for cancer, when often it is our own “Western\*” lifestyle that is the cause. (\* “West” of where I don’t know, but 500 million people live on less than \$1.90 a day and 2/3rds of the world live on less than \$10 a day. Looking as a map of global cancer occurrence will indicate this connection.) An international review of anticancer plants listed 86 species. (Kintzios, S. E., 2006, Terrestrial Plant-Derived Anticancer Agents and Plant Species Used in Anticancer research. Critical Reviews in Plant Sciences. 25: pp 79-113). There are several scientific articles and reviews on the internet relating soursop (*Annona muricata*) as a cancer treatment. Another friend of mine said it was a stupid tasteless fruit. It can be used to make beautiful sorbets that we really enjoyed when visiting “The Botanical Ark” in north Queensland.



*Annona muricata*

I often tend to mention Isaiah 28 where it claims God can teach people how to put the right plant in the right place (we call it agro-ecology these days!), but the same passage also says not to abuse the soil and not to over treat foods.

Perhaps what stimulated these thoughts is an article on herbal teas for health benefits that are sold in local markets in southern China. Almost all the plants mentioned I already have in my database but have only been thinking of them as ‘foods’ and not ‘functional foods’ with other health benefits. Most of these are very unlikely to ever get a mention in our “Western” medical system – probably because no medical company is going to put on an annual ‘junket’ trip to conferences for doctors to have their annual get-togethers. They can’t make money out of them! In India they had to employ 70 scientists translating information from Sanskrit into English and German to stop western medical companies patenting already known information and local plants.

In my view, the answer remains to eat and enjoy a diversity of food plants.

With thanks for your interest, *Bruce*



*Stevia rebaudiana*



*Ginkgo biloba*



*Centella asiatica*



*Oenothera biennis*



*Urtica dioica*

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