

MALABAR SPINACH

Brède D'angola, Ceylon Spinach, Poi Sag, Malabar Nightshade, Zepina, Indian Spinach

Basella alba, *Basella rubra*

Basellaceae

ECHO® PLANT INFORMATION SHEET

Origin

Malabar spinach is native to tropical Asia, probably originating in India or Indonesia. Today, it is grown widely in the tropics as a perennial and in warmer temperate regions as an annual. Malabar spinach plants are green (*Basella alba*) or purplish (*Basella rubra*) vines with thick fleshy leaves exhibiting one of two leaf forms: closely spaced oval to rounded leaves; or, more widely spaced heart-shaped leaves. Most authors agree, however, that the two color forms of Malabar spinach are not separate species. Perhaps both would best be treated as forms of *Basella rubra*.

Uses

The leaves and young stems of Malabar spinach are an excellent hot weather spinach substitute. The young leaves may be eaten raw in salads, the leaves and young stems cooked as a potherb mixed with vegetables, the leaves cooked separately as a spinach, or added to soups. The purple juice from the fruits may be used as a food dye to color pastries or sweets. Boiled seeds are sometimes added to dahl in Bangladesh. The plant is often grown as an ornamental.

Common Names

- French
 - épinard de malabar
 - épinard indien
 - épinard de malabar
- Spanish
 - Espinaca Malabar
 - Brède De Malabar
 - Espinaca Blanca
- Haitian Creole
 - Zepina Malaba

Cultivation

Malabar spinach may be direct-seeded in tropical or temperate gardens if all danger of frost has passed and night temperatures are above 14° C (60° F). Plant seed 2.5 cm (1 in) deep, 2.5 cm (1 in) apart in rows 75 cm (2.5 ft) apart. Thin established seedlings to 30 cm (1 ft). In temperate regions it is preferable to start seedlings in pots indoors eight weeks prior to the last spring frost. Stem tip cuttings (15-20 cm/6-8 in) also may be used to propagate Malabar spinach. Initially, cuttings require partial shade. Malabar spinach tolerates a wide range of soil conditions but does best on slightly acidic (pH 6-6.7) humus-rich sandy loams. Mulching is recommended to keep the soil moist. Trellis- or pole-grown vines have cleaner leaves than unsupported plants. Malabar spinach is not cold tolerant; its growth is slow and stunted by cold weather.

Harvesting and Seed Production

Plant tips (8-12 cm/3-5 in) may be cut from unsupported plants as soon as the tips bend downward. Trellis-supported plant tips and leaves may be cut after the vine reaches 60-70 cm (2 ft). Very early harvests stunt growth. Repeated (weekly) harvests of vigorous vines stimulates branch development. Picking of young flower stalks may promote vegetative growth as well. Although very young flower stalks may be eaten, avoid harvests of older tough flower stalks for food. To save seeds, the pulpy flesh can be completely removed and rinsed until the water runs clear. Or the seeds can just be dried on screens with the pulp on. Be sure the seed is dry before storing.

Pests and Diseases

Malabar spinach is extremely sensitive to nematode damage and can be grown for only a few months if at all where nematode populations are high. Otherwise, it is usually pest and disease free. A fungus, *Cercospora beticola*, causes red spots and holes in leaves. Remove and destroy infected leaves to prevent disease spread.

Cooking and Nutrition

The leaves and cut tips of Malabar spinach are used in food preparations much like one uses spinach or chard. Young Malabar spinach leaves may be added raw to salads or the leaves and stem tips are cooked with other vegetables as a potherb, cooked separately as a spinach or added, chopped, to soups and stews. Oriental chefs steam or stir-fry Malabar spinach. Although the cooking odor of Malabar spinach is strong, the flavor is mild. Red leaves lose their attractive red color upon cooking. The thick leaves and stems of Malabar spinach are somewhat mucilaginous especially with prolonged cooking. Malabar spinach is lower in protein than some other leafy vegetables like amaranths, but it is an excellent source of vitamins A and C and a good source of calcium and iron.