

## Food of the Forest: the little-known uses of wild plants

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Imagine if your fruits and vegetables, beauty products, medicine and most of what you need in life came from the local forest outside your house.

This may seem like a dream back to a time before global shipping and infrastructure for mass production came into existence. But for many local and Indigenous communities around the world, it's still a reality, with knowledge that's been passed down for generations on how to use plants to make everything from dyes to cockroach repellent.

[Food of the Forest](#), a project by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), combines art and science to give readers a glimpse into this ancestral know-how. The new platform spotlights unique plants from around the world, as well as their uses and nutritional properties.

"The idea is to build on this library to help raise awareness of how vital these forests are to millions of people around the world and how we need to protect them," wrote the project's creative director Mardiyah Miller in an email.



*Habenaria clavata*, which is used to make chikanda or "Zambian meatloaf."

Take *Adansonia digitata*, a species of [Baobab](#) tree, as an example. Known as the "tree of life," it grows across large parts of Africa, bearing fruit high in calcium, fiber, antioxidants, potassium, iron, vitamin C and carbohydrates and can be made into jam or various drinks.

The leaves of the Baobab can be eaten like spinach and can treat a range of diseases, from asthma to kidney disease. Oil can be pressed from the seeds to use in skincare products, and the bark's fiber can be used to make rope, baskets and clothes.

Amy Ickowitz, a senior scientist at CIFOR who contributed knowledge for the Food of the Forest project, has focused much of her research on the links between tree cover and healthy diets.

"I did my PhD research many years ago in Cameroon where I looked at the relationship between shifting cultivation and deforestation," she says. "I lived in a small town in eastern Cameroon that was quite poor in terms of income."

“Although people were very poor, it seemed to me that their diets were actually pretty good, and a lot of the food that people were eating was coming either directly from the forest or, because of the type of agriculture that they practiced there – shifting cultivation – indirectly from the forest since they relied a lot on the natural regeneration of vegetation.”



*Inga edulis*, also known as the “ice-cream bean” because of its smooth texture and sweet flavor.

The Food of the Forest project, she says, is also aimed at policymakers, to present them with information on how such plants and the forests they reside in are currently promoting food security, and to do so in a visually enticing way. Many forests around the world are at risk of “development” – which means being cut down – for the sake of food security. However, what replaces these forests does not always enrich local communities’ diets to the degree that the original forest did. Often they are replaced with monocultures of calorie-rich, but nutrient poor staples instead of the beautiful diversity of nutrient-rich foods that you see here.

Additionally, when knowledge isn’t transferred to younger generations and communities [forget the value of local plants](#), they become less connected to their surrounding flora and regard it as not worth protecting.

Vina Puspita, who illustrated the project under Miller’s direction, says that before drawing, she sought to understand the plants, how they grow, how they are used and how they taste.

“It was very enjoyable and gave me a lot of new understanding, not only about the fruit itself but also in relation to the local community life. It has been such a rich experience,” she wrote in an email. “I would be very open and excited to explore more.”

Source: <https://news.globallandscapesforum.org/47012/food-of-the-forest-the-little-known-uses-of-wild-plants/>