



LBCAS LEAVES for LIFE

Desert Perennial Vegetable Series

Chaya

The Productive and Nutritious Mayan Spinach Tree



Chaya (*Cnidoscolus chayamansa*) is a small bushy tree and ancient Mayan vegetable from the Yucatan of southern Mexico. The plant continuously produces highly nutritious leaves and sweet, succulent shoots with little care. It is also called Mayan spinach tree, is a vigorous grower, and has no insect or disease problems. Well adapted to subtropical desert conditions, Chaya is grown in the garden, on small farms, and is also used for edible landscaping around the home, as it is a permanent attractive plant that does not die back. It is used for food throughout Southern Mexico, Central America, as well as Florida and south Texas, and has spread through our efforts to Polynesia, Micronesia, the South Pacific, and India.

Leaves for Life provides the improved Chaya variety *Redonda*, with large, smooth leaves and shoots, without the stinging hairs found on other varieties.

The highly nutritious leaves and tender, plump stem tips are produced throughout the warmer seasons, and are mildly sweet tasting. Growth slows in the winter. Whole young leaves are used as wraps; chopped leaves and stem tips for soups, stews, stir fry, etc., or younger leaves eaten alone as spinach. The sweet and delicious tender stem tips have commercial culinary potential. They can be eaten alone or mixed with other foods. Leaves are dried for later use.

Chaya must always be cooked for at least 10 minutes. Avoid cooking in aluminum, as a reaction may occur.

The plant's white sap can cause minor skin irritation, which is alleviated by washing with water.

Green leaves are very important in human nutrition due to high vitamin, mineral, and protein content, and other health promoting active compounds. They should be eaten every day. Leaf protein is balanced and complete by itself, unlike most grains and seeds. Nutritional data for 100g of fresh weight Chaya leaves includes: 7.4% protein (higher than cooked grains or beans), 330 mg calcium, and 9.3 mg iron. Chaya has reported medicinal activity for lowering blood sugar, and may be helpful for diabetics. The dried leaves are used as tea for this purpose.

Chaya is grown 3-4 feet apart in hedgerows, or around the home, and is great for edible landscaping. Also grown in large containers. To encourage new tender growth and for easy harvesting, keep plants 3-5 feet tall, either by periodic trimming, or better, by eating the tender shoots and leaves as they emerge. New shoots regrow rapidly.

Chaya is tolerant of full summer sun, but will be more productive, faster growing, and more tender under partial shade. Few inputs are required, and a source of organic matter and nitrogen keeps the plants fast growing and productive. Although water requirements are low, regular irrigation is important to maintain vigorous and continuous growth in the warm season for tender leaf and shoot production.

LBCAS Community Extension Service botanist@LBCAS.com

