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# AMARANTH: A DELICIOUS WEED

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If Popeye lived in Phoenix, he wouldn't need canned spinach to produce the oversized muscles that help him rescue Olive Oyl. Native amaranth (sometimes called Indian Spinach) packs as big a nutrient punch as Popeye's canned greens. It is so widely found some consider it to be a common weed, yet this wonderful native plant—and its closely related domesticated cousin—deserves to be better known as a delicious and nutritious food.

Our wild amaranth is one of the most common annuals found in moist, disturbed soils in central and southern Arizona. You can see it growing along roadsides, in alleys, lining irrigation ditches and in great numbers in empty fields and washes.

It is an annual plant reaching 1 to 6 feet tall, with one thick central stem that has a rhubarb-like reddish coloration. Its multiple short side stems have diamond-shaped green leaves that can be variegated. Amaranth's small flowers are packed on spikes, which become stiff and spiny when the plant dries. Some people are allergic to its pollen, which can cause hay fever. When dead, the plant remains for a long time, providing an unkempt, weedy appearance.

Botanically called *Amaranthus palmeri*, it has several common names that are descriptive of the plant or its uses: carelessness, pigweed and redroot. The local Spanish names, *bledo* and *quelite*, describe its use as a cooked green.

Young leaves and tender stems can be eaten raw in salads or cooked. Amaranth substitutes for any other cooked greens in recipes. Chopped, sautéed or steamed—and flavored with garlic and onions, salt and pepper—it makes a fabulous side dish. While it is best harvested in spring, new leaves can be picked through summer. The leaves are rich in iron, calcium, niacin, Vitamin C and Vitamin A, and compare well to the nutrition of spinach as a cooked green.

As the plant matures and dies in late summer, the seeds can

be harvested and used. The seeds and flour made from them are also packed with vitamins and minerals, and are a good source of protein. A single cup of the cooked grain provides 28 grams of protein—more than half of an adult's daily need.

Southwestern native peoples harvested wild amaranth, and some also grew cultivated varieties. For the Aztecs of Mexico, protein-rich amaranth was a major crop, as important to their economy as corn. When the Spanish arrived they banned amaranth, as they found distasteful the use of amaranth foods in Aztec ceremonies. For the traditional ceremonies, cakes made of popped amaranth seeds were formed into the shapes of gods and were sometimes made with human blood from sacrificial victims.

It's only recently that amaranth's reputation as a useful crop has begun to recover. In Mexico today a candy called *alegría* ("happy") is made from popped seeds and honey (like Rice Krispies treats). In the United States, amaranth has become a minor but upcoming alternative crop for American farmers, entering the health-food market in breakfast cereals, pastas, cookies, breads, etc.

Gardeners have discovered that domesticated varieties of amaranths grow as easily and as quickly as any weed, and belong in any kid-friendly garden. The plants thrive in full sun, and need only occasional watering. Plant them where you won't mind large, tall plants. Disease and pests are seldom a problem.

Because this is a multipurpose plant, you can harvest entire seedlings as you thin your rows, and pick off leaves whenever you need to add something to your salad or crave a cooked green.

When the flowers start to dry and produce seed, or after the first hard frost, tie a paper grocery sack on the large seedhead. Cut the thick stem below and let the plant dry further in the bag. Many seeds will fall onto the bottom of the bag, and others can be separated from other plant material by rubbing. Winnow off the chaff. It is inevitable that some seed will have fallen off the plant earlier, and will likely produce amaranth plants next year.

Amaranth seed can be cooked whole as a hot cereal or ground finely in a mill or blender to produce a gluten-free flour. In baking, you can replace the amount of flour called for in a recipe with one-part amaranth flour to three or four parts wheat flour. Home producers can pop the seeds in a hot-air popper, or in an ungreased steel wok or cast iron skillet over medium heat. Use 1 tablespoon of seeds and keep them moving with a brush or spoon to prevent burning. If the seeds don't pop well, sprinkle the next batch lightly with water and try later when they've had time to absorb the moisture. Popped seeds grind easily or can be mixed with honey, molasses or sugar water to form homemade *alegría*.

While Popeye might eat amaranth for exaggerated cartoon strength, much like the Aztecs did for its mystical qualities, the rest of us can enjoy this plant—either from our garden or a nearby field—as a readily available green or grain.

Photograph, Amaranth by Prodigal Gardens, [www.prodigalgardens.info](http://www.prodigalgardens.info)