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Forgotten Vegetables Making a Comeback: Rediscovering Nature's Hidden Treasures

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Over the past few decades, agricultural modernization and changing consumer preferences have led to the decline of many traditional vegetable crops that were once integral to local diets and farming systems. These "forgotten vegetables," also known as neglected, underutilized, or indigenous vegetables, possess exceptional nutritional value, climate resilience, and cultural significance. Rich in vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, and dietary fiber, these crops have sustained rural communities for generations while requiring fewer agricultural inputs than many commercial vegetables. Growing awareness of healthy eating, sustainable agriculture, biodiversity conservation, and climate-resilient farming has renewed interest in these traditional vegetables. Farmers, researchers, chefs, and consumers are increasingly recognizing their importance in ensuring food and nutritional security while preserving agricultural heritage. This article highlights the significance of forgotten vegetables, the reasons for their decline, examples of important indigenous vegetables, their nutritional and environmental benefits, challenges to their wider adoption, and strategies to promote their cultivation and consumption in the modern era.

Keywords: Forgotten vegetables, Underutilized crops, Indigenous vegetables, Biodiversity, Nutritional security, Climate resilience, Sustainable agriculture, Traditional foods

Introduction

Vegetables have always been an essential component of human nutrition, providing vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, and dietary fiber necessary for healthy living. Before the widespread adoption of modern agriculture, communities relied heavily on locally adapted vegetables that thrived naturally under regional climatic conditions. These vegetables were cultivated not only for their nutritional value but also for their medicinal properties, adaptability, and cultural importance. However, the Green Revolution, urbanization, globalization, and changing food preferences gradually shifted agricultural production toward a limited number of high-yielding commercial crops. As supermarkets became filled with tomatoes, cabbage, cauliflower, carrots, onions, and capsicum throughout the year, many indigenous vegetables slowly disappeared from farms and dining tables. Today, growing concerns about malnutrition, lifestyle diseases, climate change, and loss of biodiversity are encouraging people to rediscover these forgotten crops. Once considered "poor people's food," many traditional vegetables are now being appreciated as nutrient-rich "superfoods" with immense potential for sustainable agriculture.

What Are Forgotten Vegetables?

Forgotten vegetables are traditional, indigenous, heirloom, or underutilized vegetable crops that were once widely cultivated but gradually lost popularity due to changing agricultural systems and consumer preferences. Unlike commercial vegetables, these crops have received relatively little scientific research, breeding attention, or market promotion. Nevertheless,

they possess remarkable genetic diversity and are often naturally adapted to local environmental conditions. Many forgotten vegetables continue to survive in home gardens, tribal regions, rural farms, and forest ecosystems, where they remain an important source of food and nutrition.

Why Were They Forgotten?

Several factors contributed to their decline. The introduction of high-yielding hybrid varieties encouraged farmers to cultivate commercially profitable vegetables. Urban consumers increasingly preferred vegetables with attractive appearance, longer shelf life, and year-round availability. Traditional vegetables often lacked organized marketing systems and received limited support from agricultural research programs. Changing lifestyles also influenced food habits. Younger generations gradually lost familiarity with traditional recipes, while processed and convenience foods became more popular. Consequently, many nutritious indigenous vegetables were replaced by a small number of globally traded crops, leading to reduced dietary diversity and erosion of agricultural biodiversity.

Examples of Forgotten Vegetables Making a Comeback

India possesses a rich diversity of traditional vegetables that are once again gaining recognition.

Spiny Brinjal (*Solanum insanum*): A traditional brinjal relative cultivated in parts of South India, spiny brinjal is rich in phenolic compounds, antioxidants, vitamins, and minerals. It also possesses natural resistance to several pests and diseases, making it valuable for breeding climate-resilient varieties.

Basella (Malabar Spinach): Basella is a fast-growing leafy vegetable rich in iron, calcium, vitamin A, and vitamin C. It tolerates high temperatures and requires relatively little maintenance, making it suitable for home gardens and urban farming.

Amaranthus (Leaf Amaranth): Leaf amaranth is an excellent source of protein, calcium, iron, folate, and antioxidants. It grows rapidly, tolerates drought, and provides continuous harvests throughout the growing season.

Drumstick (*Moringa oleifera*): Although widely known, drumstick leaves remain underutilized despite their exceptional nutritional value. Rich in protein, calcium, vitamin A, vitamin C, potassium, and antioxidants, moringa is often referred to as the "Miracle Tree."

Ivy Gourd (*Coccinia grandis*): Ivy gourd is a perennial vegetable valued for its edible fruits and leaves. It contains dietary fiber, vitamin C, and bioactive compounds that have attracted attention for their potential health benefits.

Cluster Bean (*Cyamopsis tetragonoloba*): Cluster bean is drought tolerant and thrives under semi-arid conditions. Besides providing nutritious pods, it improves soil fertility through biological nitrogen fixation.

Winged Bean (*Psophocarpus tetragonolobus*): Every part of the winged bean—including pods, leaves, flowers, seeds, and tubers—is edible. It is rich in protein and can contribute significantly to nutritional security in tropical regions.

Nutritional Importance

Forgotten vegetables are often nutritionally superior to commonly consumed vegetables. Many contain higher concentrations of vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, dietary fiber, and phytochemicals that help reduce the risk of chronic diseases.

Regular consumption of these vegetables contributes to:

- Improved immunity
- Better digestive health
- Reduced micronutrient deficiencies
- Protection against oxidative stress
- Lower risk of diabetes and cardiovascular diseases

Their rich nutritional composition makes them particularly valuable in combating "hidden hunger," where people consume enough calories but lack essential vitamins and minerals.

Climate-Resilient Crops for the Future

One of the greatest advantages of forgotten vegetables is their resilience under challenging environmental conditions. Many indigenous vegetables have evolved over centuries in local ecosystems and naturally tolerate drought, heat, poor soils, and irregular rainfall. They generally require fewer chemical fertilizers and pesticides than commercial crops. As climate change increases the frequency of extreme weather events, these hardy vegetables offer farmers reliable alternatives that ensure stable production while conserving natural resources.

Role in Sustainable Agriculture

Forgotten vegetables support sustainable farming in several ways. Their cultivation promotes crop diversification, reducing dependence on a few commercial crops. Increased diversity also interrupts pest and disease cycles while improving soil health. Many indigenous vegetables attract pollinators and beneficial insects, contributing to ecological balance. Since they require fewer external inputs, they reduce production costs and minimize environmental pollution. These crops are therefore well suited for organic farming, natural farming, kitchen gardens, and climate-smart agriculture.

Growing Consumer Interest

Health-conscious consumers are increasingly seeking foods that are natural, locally produced, and nutritionally dense. Restaurants are incorporating traditional vegetables into innovative recipes, while chefs are reviving forgotten culinary traditions. Farmers' markets, organic food stores, online grocery platforms, and farm-to-table initiatives have also increased the visibility of indigenous vegetables. Social media has further accelerated their popularity by highlighting traditional recipes and health benefits.

Challenges

Despite growing interest, several challenges remain. The availability of quality seeds is often limited. Many forgotten vegetables lack improved varieties and organized seed production systems. Scientific research on cultivation practices, post-harvest handling, and value addition is still inadequate. Market demand remains localized, and consumers may not be familiar with preparation methods. Limited awareness and insufficient extension support continue to restrict large-scale adoption.

The Way Forward

Reviving forgotten vegetables requires coordinated efforts from researchers, policymakers, farmers, educators, and consumers. Agricultural universities should strengthen breeding programs and develop improved varieties while conserving traditional germplasm. Governments can encourage cultivation through seed distribution, demonstration plots, and inclusion in nutrition programs. Schools and colleges can promote awareness through kitchen gardens and nutrition education. Food industries can develop value-added products, while chefs and media can popularize traditional recipes among younger generations. Consumers also play an important role by choosing locally grown seasonal vegetables and supporting farmers who cultivate indigenous crops.

Conclusion

Forgotten vegetables are far more than relics of the past—they represent a valuable resource for building a healthier and more sustainable future. Their remarkable nutritional richness, adaptability to changing climates, low input requirements, and contribution to biodiversity make them indispensable for resilient food systems. As awareness of healthy diets and sustainable agriculture continues to grow, these traditional vegetables are steadily reclaiming their place on farms and dining tables. Reviving forgotten vegetables is not merely about preserving heritage; it is about embracing resilient crops that can nourish people, protect ecosystems, and strengthen food security for future generations.

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