

## **Native Foods a Hot Commodity in the Philippines**

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The Philippines' native malunggay tree is a treasure – almost every part of it can be used for food. Its young pods can be prepared like green beans, its seeds can be roasted like nuts, and its dark-green leaves, rich in Vitamin C, protein, and iron, can be used fresh like spinach or dried as a seasoning.

When SANREM CRSP researchers introduced a new malunggay variety in the Philippines' Lantapan watershed, it was an instant hit. Farmers were surprised that it grew so well in the region's acid soil. They clamored for seedlings and cultivation guidelines. The slender trees are so much in demand that they are disappearing from test plots, says Agustin Mercado, a SANREM partner and World Agroforestry Center researcher. "I don't know whether this is bad or not," Mercado says, "but people are desperate to get our malunggay."

The malunggay, *Moringa oleifera*, is among indigenous trees and vegetables that SANREM researchers Mercado, Flordeliza Faustino, and Liwayway Engle are using to identify varieties that prosper in agro-forestry systems. The scientists are sharing their findings – as well as seeds and seedlings – with local residents. At a village field day, more than 60 people sampled vegetables cooked and raw, commenting on their taste and appearance, as well as the pros and cons of growing them. Included were several native gourds; amaranthus, known locally as kulitis and used like spinach; green leafy roselle; katuray, whose white flowers can be used in salads; and exotic varieties of bell pepper, carrot, and tomato. Field-day participants took home not only plants and seeds but also recipes and leaflets on how to grow and use native varieties.

By reintroducing native foods in a region plagued by poverty and degraded natural resources, researchers hope to teach farmers how to use and conserve plants, improve family nutrition by diversifying the diet, increase incomes, and enhance biodiversity. They also are documenting residents' knowledge of native plants' medicinal values.

The vegetable field day was one in a series of workshops by SANREM's Long-term Research Award project in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam. The project's broad objective is to develop economically viable and ecologically sound agro-forestry systems that integrate vegetable crops with trees or trees with vegetable crops – under or beside them, simultaneously or in sequence. The project is also experimenting with low-cost drip irrigation, reduced tillage, pest management, and soil enrichment.

Field-day participants seemed most interested in the native plants that were least familiar to them. Generally, they preferred cooked vegetable dishes rather than salads. Of the 25 vegetables and trees introduced, which would they consider planting? The consensus among farmers was that any new crop would have to meet five criteria: high nutritional value, long shelf life, easy marketability as fresh produce, good taste, and availability of seeds.

The SANREM team, comprising more than 30 scientists, engineers, and other development experts, is working closely with the World Agroforestry Center and World Vegetable Center. Its principal investigator is Manuel Reyes, a biological and agricultural engineer at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University in Greensboro.

Reyes puts a positive spin on the malunggay thefts. "We must be having an impact," he says, "if people are so eager to get the trees."

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