Malaysia's forgotten superfoods: The nutritional power of *ulam* and wild veggies

BY **DR YASMIN OOI**

THERE was a time when a meal was incomplete without a serving of fresh, raw or lightly blanched leaves, preferably with freshly made *sambal belacan*. *Ulam* includes traditional local vegetables, herbs and shoots. When all these *ulam* are mixed with fish, anchovies or toasted desiccated coconut, we have endless versions of *kerabu* or *lawar*. The *kerabu jantung pisang* comes to mind – blanched banana blossom, shredded, mixed with grilled fish, shredded coconut (fresh or toasted), chillies, lime juice and shallots. Their actual value lies beyond taste; they are our local nutrient treasures, packed with multiple vitamins, minerals, phytonutrients and fibre. Many of these ingredients were in our garden.

70% of us live in urban areas and that number is increasing. We live in high rises with no land to plant a banana tree. Urban land parcels often receive the cement treatment. Most house owners have no time to prevent the "threat" of harbouring a slithering serpentine neighbour in the untended bushes. We increasingly buy from supermarkets and hypermarkets, and sometimes from pop-up markets such as farmers' markets and wet markets. Supermarkets and hypermarkets tend to sell fewer local and traditional vegetables, if at all. Common vegetables like *sawi, bayam, kangkung,* broccoli, cabbage and *kailan* are on the shelves.

Ulam

Our traditional Malaysian salad includes *ulam raja*. This fragrant, slightly astringent and mildly peppery feather-like leaf packs a king's ransom in vitamin C. For every 100g, it has 64.6mg of vitamin C. In comparison, oranges contain between 47mg and 59mg per 100g. The Malaysian Recommended Nutrient Intake for vitamin C is 70mg per day for adults. It is a good source of calcium, potassium, iron and beta-carotene, a precursor to vitamin A, as well as beneficial bioactive compounds such as quercetin. These compounds neutralise free radicals that can cause cellular damage, potentially leading to chronic diseases and cancer.

Another common *ulam* is *daun kaduk*. This heart-shaped leaf grows very easily in a pot or in the ground. Its peppery aroma is perfect for wrapping snacks like *miang kham*. It's a refreshing snack, a small parcel containing toasted coconut, ginger, shallots, peanuts, chillies, lime and dried shrimps. It's also an ingredient in favourites like the Nyonya *otak-otak* and *nasi kerabu*. For every 100g, fresh *daun kaduk* contains 78.9mg of vitamin C. It is also a good source of carotenes and potassium.

Wild vegetables

To many people, wild vegetables are the lesser-known varieties, conjuring up images of foraging at the edge of jungles. However, in certain communities, they are very much sought after. By riverbanks, paddy fields and open marshy areas, there are *lemiding* in Sabah, the sun-loving climbing *midin* in Sarawak and the pakis in Peninsular Malaysia. All these edible ferns taste slightly sweet and are delicious simply stir-fried with garlic. Some people stir-fry with *belacan* and chillies. Use belacan sparingly, as it contains a lot of salt. When cooking with belacan, do not add any additional salt. Ferns could also be blanched and served with a favourite sambal. All are nutrient-dense, low-calorie greens rich in fibre and antioxidants. They are also rich in iron and potassium. They are free if foraged and cost about RM2 in local markets.

Some wild vegetables are not that wild after all. Most of us know about tapioca leaves. The young leaves are edible, either blanched and served with sambal or cooked in light coconut milk, turmeric and chillies *(masak lemak)* or blanched and then stir-fried with papaya flowers, anchovies or dried shrimps or used in stews like the chicken in bamboo *(manok pansoh)* in Sarawak. There is caution, though, for safe consumption of tapioca leaves. It contains naturally occurring compounds called cyanogenic glycosides, which release harmful hydrogen cyanide. Therefore, the leaves are dangerous if consumed raw.

Throughout Southeast Asia, we have traditional methods to neutralise this danger. The goal of these methods is to allow plant enzymes to break down cyanogenic glycosides and remove the volatile cyanide gas through heat and washing. We crush or pound the leaves. Then we boil the leaves for 10 to 15 minutes until they are soft and discard the water. Then we rinse the boiled leaves in cold water and squeeze out all excess water before using the treated leaves for further cooking. These steps are to remove all hydrogen cyanide. These sound like a health hazard. Why do so many of us continue to consume it? Tapioca leaves contain higher protein than many other green leafy vegetables, like spinach. Cooked tapioca leaves contain about 3g to 7g of protein per 100g, compared to cooked spinach, which has about 3g. Younger tapioca leaves contain more protein than older leaves. Cooked tapioca leaves are also a good source of dietary fibre, 2g to 4g per 100 g. Dietary fibre aids in digestion, promotes gut health and prevents constipation. We are recommended to consume 20g to 30g of fibre per day. Many Malaysians do not meet this. Dietary fibre can only be obtained from plant sources. Vegetables are one of the main sources.

Malaysians are recommended to consume at least three servings of vegetables and two servings of fruit each day, commonly known as the 5-a-day. The most recent National Health and Morbidity Survey 2024 indicates that only 12% of adults consume three servings of vegetables every day. Almost everyone, 95.1% of adults, consumes less than the recommended five servings of fruits and vegetables per day. It is important to increase the consumption of fruits and vegetables. Start by exploring the many vegetables around us and look out for these traditional and lesser-known varieties today. Get the correct facts about *ulam* and wild vegetables from a registered nutritionist and make informed, healthy choices every day.

"Wild vegetables are low-calorie greens, rich in iron, potassium and antioxidants."

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