

# Moringa touted as next 'super food'

By PADMA NAGAPPAN  
For the Capital Press

Asian farmers in California's Central Valley have been

growing a new crop, moringa, which researchers say is a versatile food plant that can be used for a variety of purposes.

Moringa is originally from India, where it's called drum stick or "moorungakai," with its name evolving as it spread to parts of Africa and Asia before making its way state-side. All parts of the plant are edible — its leaves, the drum stick pods, seeds, root and bark.

Leaves can be used in soups and salads, and added in powdered form to different dishes or drunk as tea. The young pods are used by Indians in a variety of dishes, from gravies to stir fries. The roasted seeds are said to have antibiotic and anti-fungal properties, and the roots and bark are used to combat inflammation.

Despite all this, it's still a humble plant in India, where it's often grown in people's backyards and found at grocery stores and farmers' markets, usually placed on the side while other vegetables take center stage.

In specialty food stores and online, moringa is sold



Padma Nagappan/For the Capital Press

With the help of a state grant, UCANR researchers are testing how much protein, iron and vitamins moringa contains, and have developed recipes in which the leaves and pod can be used.

in dry powdered form and touted as a "miracle food" or "super food."

When researchers from the University of California's Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources found local Asian farmers growing it, and understood the nutritional value of this humble plant, they began to look for ways to promote it, so more farmers could grow it, and the public could learn how to use it. With the help of a state-funded grant, they're

testing how much protein, iron and vitamins it contains, and have developed recipes in which the leaves and pod can be used.

"We found there was a market for the value-added product as a powder used in smoothies, savory dishes, oatmeal," said Lorena Maria Ramos, new crop research associate with the small farms program at UCANR in Fresno. "It's versatile."

In farmers' markets in the Fresno area, its leaves are

sold for \$1 a bundle. With encouragement and education from Ruth Dahlquist-Willard, a small farms advisor at UCANR who first recognized the potential of moringa, and help from Ramos, more local growers are beginning to plant and sell it.

"The whole point is to give farmers an opportunity to create a value-added product that will boost their business and provide an additional source of income for their farms," Ramos said.

Moringa is drought tolerant, which suits California's dry conditions. It does well in hot weather, but winter can be challenging, because cold snaps and freezes can be problematic, so farmers will need to cover it with plastic or grow it in a greenhouse. A sapling planted in the spring can grow to 8 feet by early fall.

Ramos is working on developing marketing materials, outreach opportunities and value-added options. UCANR recently released several recipes to promote moringa and educate the public on how to use it.

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- Number of events in the US: more than 250
- Number of participants in 2017: more than 1.4 million walkers
- Number of dollars raised in 2017: more than \$60 million

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