

## **Five Nutritious Veggies Native to the Philippines**

With the words “organic,” “cleanse” and “gluten-free” fast becoming part of our day-to-day lingo, today’s lifestyle trends lean more towards turning every Juan, Dick and Sally into a lean, mean, superhealthy fitness machine. And really, with all the health benefits everyone is reaping from the influx of products and information, the trend is not a bad thing, not at all. If you haven’t amped up your gym routine in the past year or so (or actually started making it to the gym), you’ve probably given (or thought of giving) juicing a try. But before you make a beeline for the kale in the organic produce aisle yet again, take another look at the locally-cultivated vegetables right next to it. When you elect to eat local, you are not only giving your body a wider range of tastes and nutrients, but you are also bolstering up our own farming and agriculture industries, and taking it easier on your own pocket. Indigenous vegetables are easier to grow, more resistant to local pests, and are also easier to blend in with local dishes and recipes. And to get a hold of them, you may not even have to venture as far as the produce aisle in your neighborhood grocery. Some of these may even be growing in your own backyard.

1. Malunggay (moringa)

The “miracle tree,” the “superfood,” and possibly an antidote to world hunger, malunggay definitely deserves the sterling reputation it has been given. Every single part of the plant can be eaten, and can be used to combat malnutrition worldwide because each part is packed so densely with nutrients, including high amounts of protein, all eight essential amino acids, numerous vitamins and minerals, phytonutrients and powerful disease-fighting anti-oxidants. Malunggay pods contain essential amino acids, vitamins and other nutrients, and can be fried or eaten raw. Frying the pods also produces an edible oil called “Ben oil,” which is rich in antioxidants and similar in nutritional value to olive oil. The leaves can be added to salads, soups, or other dishes, or even dried up into a nutrient-rich powder. Malunggay powder contains incredible amounts of vitamins A, B2 and B3, magnesium, iron, protein and calcium. The plant has been found to be antibacterial, anti-fungal and anti-inflammatory, traditionally being used to prevent and treat rheumatism, arthritis and joint pains. It is also popularly known to increase the milk flow of lactating mothers. Malunggay has also been shown to have anti-cancer properties, as well as chemoprotective aspects, which strengthen cells of cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy.

2. Kulitis (amaranth or Chinese spinach)

What looks like a weed but is really a very good substitute for spinach, kulitis grows abundantly in the country, even in wastelands, dry areas and pastures as it is drought-resistant and self-sustaining. Kulitis is an excellent source of protein, similar to quinoa, and has been used as an

ingredient in gluten-free food products. It was, in fact, a staple food of the ancient Aztecs. Kulitis leaves are rich in vitamins A, C, E, K, B5 and B6, and iron, calcium. It can lower cholesterol levels and blood pressure, has anti-inflammatory properties that may prevent diabetes and heart disease, and even cancer. Toss your kulitis leaves into salads, or include them in soups, stews and sauté dishes.

3. Alugbati (basella or vine spinach)

Containing a great amount of nutrients, alugbati has been used medicinally as a remedy for headaches, constipation, inflammation and ulcers. A common resident in backyard gardens, a cup of alugbati contains your recommended daily intake of vitamin A, and is also a great source of calcium, potassium, and folic acid. It carries enough vitamin C in 100 grams to meet your recommended daily intake as well, and is rich too in many B-complex vitamins, as well as iron. Similar to English spinach, alugbati helps prevent osteoporosis and iron-deficiency anemia, and is believed to protect against cardiovascular diseases and cancer of the colon.

4. Saluyot (jute)

Saluyot grows almost anywhere and everywhere in the country, year-round, and can thrive with very little care. An Ilocano favorite, which can be found in dishes such as dinengdeng and bulang-bulang, saluyot contains almost all the important nutrients needed by the body, from protein and carbohydrates, to iron, thiamin, riboflavin, vitamin C and much more. It is also rich in antioxidants and vitamins A and E. Saluyot can treat inflammation and pain, including arthritis and headaches, as well as digestive problems such as diarrhea, dysentery, constipation and ulcers. It has beta-carotene for good eyesight, calcium for strong bone and teeth, and iron for healthy blood cells. Because of its vitamin E and antioxidants, it is said to prevent wrinkles and youthful looking skin. In fact, its origin takes it all the way back to ancient Egypt, where Egyptian royalty consumed it to keep themselves looking radiant.

5. Talinum (waterleaf)

Talinum is often found in backyards as well, grown as both food and as an ornament. Favoring a hot climate, it's perfect for our tropical environment. The plant is packed with Vitamins A and C, and has also been used to help lactating mothers produce milk. It can also be utilized as a treatment for liver and kidney problems, and studies are being conducted on octacosanol, a supplement extracted from its roots, which has been found useful for treating human herpes and certain skin diseases. Talinum is cooked the way spinach is cooked, and can be eaten in salads, or cooked into soups and stews.

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