

## Some Sri Lankan common pot-herbs

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### ABSTRACT

As a follow-up of the articles of R. Brindha and S. Parvathy, ASL, XXII, 2003, 166-168, fifteen edible plants of South Asian ecosystem, commonly used in Sri Lankan cuisine, are dealt with in view of their ethnobotanical and ethnomedical value. Their vernacular names (Sanskrit, Sinhala, and Tamil given here) often reveal different botanical features and medicinal properties.

The article of R. Brindha and S. Parvathy, "Ethnobotanical medicines of Anaimalai Union Pollach Taluk, Coimbatore district, Tamilnadu", referred to in abstract above, contains not less than nineteen plants (out of twenty-five) which are used in Sri Lanka as well. They are (as numbered in that article):

1. *Andrographis paniculata*
2. *Alternanthera sessilis*
3. *Adathoda vasica*
4. *Boerhaavia diffusa*
5. *Cissus quadrangularis*
6. *Centella asiatica*
7. *Curcuma longa*
8. *Cuminum cyminum*
10. *Eclipta prostrata*
14. *Myristica fragrans*
15. *Melia azadirachta*
17. *Piper betle*
18. *Phyllanthus niruri*
19. *Pongamia pinnata*
20. *Sesbania grandiflora*
21. *Solanum nigrum*
22. *Solanum trilobatum*
24. *Thespesia populnea*
25. *Zingiber officinale*

Out of them, *Alternanthera sessilis*, *Boerhaavia diffusa*, *Centella asiatica*, *Sesbania grandiflora* and *Solanum trilobatum* are commonly used as food in Sri Lanka.

*Curcuma longa* and *Cuminum cyminum* are used as condiments.

It is proposed in this article to add to these seven plants eight other Sri Lankan pot-herbs with their names in Sanskrit, Sinhala, Tamil and English and to indicate their culinary use and medicinal properties. Plant names shed light on different aspects of the plants concerned; their culinary and medicinal uses are of ethnobotanical and ethnomedicinal interest<sup>1</sup>.

The following list of plants, grouped according to the family, gives in order the family; botanical name (updated according to the *Index Kewensis*, last revised June 1996); names in Sanskrit, Sinhala, Tamil, English (only the commonest names are given with their significance indicated within brackets); culinary use; medicinal properties (as indicated in the two publications of the Department of Ayurveda, Colombo, cited in the bibliography<sup>2</sup>).

## **Amaranthaceae**

1. *Alternanthera sessilis* Lem. (sic) [Lam.?]; matsyaksa (fish-eye, referring to the form of the leaves); mukunuvanna; ponnukani; chaff-flower, joyweed.

The stem is dry cooked with sliced onions, curry powder and grated coconut.

Eases bowel motion; increases appetite; good for disorders of the liver, gall and urinary bladders, kidneys and for eye diseases.

## **Araceae**

2. *Lasia spinosa* Thw; abhiru(fearless, in reference to the thorny stalk; kohila; kohila ?; lasia (Fig 1).

Rhizome, stem and leaves are prepared as curry. A palatable preparations is made adding the juice of the rhizome to a rice porridge with coconut milk and jaggery as a remedy for piles<sup>3</sup>.

## **Cucurbitaceae**

5. *Luffa acutangula* Roxb.; kosataki (sheath-composed, in reference to the fruit<sup>5</sup>); vatakolu; peeram; ridged gourd, ribbed luffa.

6. *Momordica charantia* Descourt.; karavella; karavila, karivila, pavakkai; balsam pear(Fig2), bitter gourd.

Fruit is prepared as a curry with coconut milk. Eaten also as a salad with raw or fried fruit, flavoured with small red onions, salt and lime juice.

Heals piles; helps digestion; pacifies blood bile (raktapitta); increases the function of the liver; regulates vata.

## **Basellaceae**

3. *Basella alba* L.; upodika (abundance of water); niviti; pasalai; (Ceylon or Indian) spinach. Leaves prepared as a curry<sup>4</sup> and also added to dhal curry.

Pacifies vata and pitta; induces sleep; increases physical strength; fattening.

## **Convolvulaceae**

4. *Ipomoea aquatica* Forsk.; nalika (tubular, in reference to the hollow stalk); kumkum; koilangu; swamp cabbage, water spinach.

Stems with leaves fried mostly with sprats and dried chillies.

Fruit is prepared as a curry with coconut milk. Heals phlegmatic piles; purifies the stomach

Pacifies the three humours; increases appetite; good for constipation; eliminates fat; heals diabetes (extract has effect like insulin) and ulcers; antidote.

<sup>1</sup>The importance of the study plant names for the correct identification of plants has been shown in the following article: Thierry Deroin & Jinadasa Liyanaratne, "Plant names and phytomorphological terminology in Ayurvedic science", *Journal of European Ayurvedic Society*, 4, 1995, 11-25, reproduced in Jinadas Liyanarantne, *Buddhism and traditional medicine in Sri Lanka*, Kelaniya, 1999, 201-217.

<sup>2</sup>These were preferred to the classical nighantus in view of the personal experience of their authors who are practicing Ayurvedic physicians.

<sup>3</sup>Jaggery is the solidifies form of the boiled sap of the flowers of the coconut or the palm tree (palmyra, toddy palm, *Borassus flabellifer* or, jaggery palm *Caryota urens*).

7. *Trichosanthes anguina* L.; ahipala (snake-fruit), dirghahhala (long-fruit); patola; putalai; snake gourd.

Fruit used as curry with coconut milk. Pacifies the three humours; good for the heart and parasitic diseases; satiates thirst; increases appetite.

### **Leguminosae**

8. *Sebania grandiflora* Poir.; agastya agasti, munidruma (sage-tree); katuru murumgal; akatti, akathi, agati tree, corkwood tree.

Leaves, flowers, pods prepared as curry. Young leaves used as a salad. Leaves and flowers used for medicinal preparations for catarrh. Good for the brain, parasitic diseases and white vaginal discharge; increase appetite; pacifies blood bile (raktapitta).

### **Malvaceae**

9. *Hibiscus esculentus* L. ; bhindi; bandakka; vendai; ladies' fingers, gombo (plant). Fig-3.

Fruit prepared as curry, some times after frying.

Diuretic aphrodisiac (attributed to the viscosity); good for catarrh, urinary and duodenal disorders, white vaginal discharge.

### **Solanaceae**

12. *Solanum trilobatus* L.; alarka; val tibbatu (creeper with berries); tutuvalai; nightshade.

<sup>4</sup>Curry is a vegetable preparation (cooked or fried) using spices (coriander, cumin, cinnamon, curry leaves, etc.)

<sup>5</sup>Because of the sheath (integument), the dried fruit is used as a sponge to rub the body. Hence the

13. *Cuminum cyminum* L.; jiraka; suduru, sududuru; jirakam; cumin.

### **Moringaceae**

10. *Moringa oleifera* Lam.; sobhanjana (beauty-maker), sigru, tiksngandha (strong-smelling); murumga; drumstick tree, horse radish.

Pods are cooked in coconut milk sauce, leaves are added to some other curries, bark is added to pickles.

Antinode (see note 4 below). Bark, seeds, roots and resin used in medicinal preparations for skin diseases, piles. Pacifies vata and slesma; increases appetite and the function of the kidneys; good for swelling, parasitic diseases; matures tumours; regulates humours.

### **Nyctaginaceae**

11. *Boerhaavia diffusa* Engelm. & A. Gray.; punarnava (renews [life], rejuvenates<sup>6</sup>), sothaghni, (swelling killer); sarana; mukkirattai; vellaiccaranai; hogweed.

Stem with leaves prepared as a curry. Diuretic and therefore reduces swelling; pacifies the three humours; laxative; increases blood; good for cough, asthma, skin diseases and distended abdomen.

Berries prepared as Curry. Used in medicinal compositions for cough and respiratory problems.

name 'vegetable sponge' given to the plant. The name Luffam derived from the Arabic loofah, shows the instrumentality of the Arabs in the proration of the plant.

### **Umbelliferae**

Added to curries mostly with coriander for flavour.

Pacifies vata and slesma; regulates vata; increases pitta; appetite and breast milk;

constipates; purifies blood; diuretic; good for vomiting; indigestion, distended abdomen and diarrhea.

## Zingiberaceae

14. *Curcuma malabarica* K.C. Velauthan, V.A. Amalraj & V.K. Muralitharan; haridra (yellow); kaha; manjal; turmeric. Added to all curries. Antispetic.<sup>7</sup> Increases appetite; cleans with womb; good for parasitic diseases, skin diseases and diabetes.

## Conclusion

These plants belonging to a common ecosystem of South Asia point to cross cultural relations in the region.<sup>8</sup> *Cuminum cyminum*, native to Mediterranean regions but now cultivated in India, China, USA, Malta and Sicily, indicates the trade relations which led to the geographical distribution of the plant. Almost all the pot-herbs and spices of the Sri Lankan cuisine have medicinal properties and, for that reason, are used medicinal drugs, too. Regrettably, the abundant use of chemical fertilizers today is prejudicial to their health value as well as their taste.

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<sup>7</sup>This plant has other uses of ethnomedical and ethnobotanical interest. For instance, the raw rhizome is ground with the leaves of the drumstick tree (*Moringa oleifera* Lam.) and applied on dog bites to remove the poison. The powder of the dry rhizome is mixed with water which is sprinkled in the house as a purificatory measure.

<sup>8</sup>See Jinadasa Liyanaratne, Historical relations between South India and Sri Lanka in the fields of health and medicine, *Buddhism and traditional medicine in Sri Lanka*, Kelaniya, 1999, 49-58.

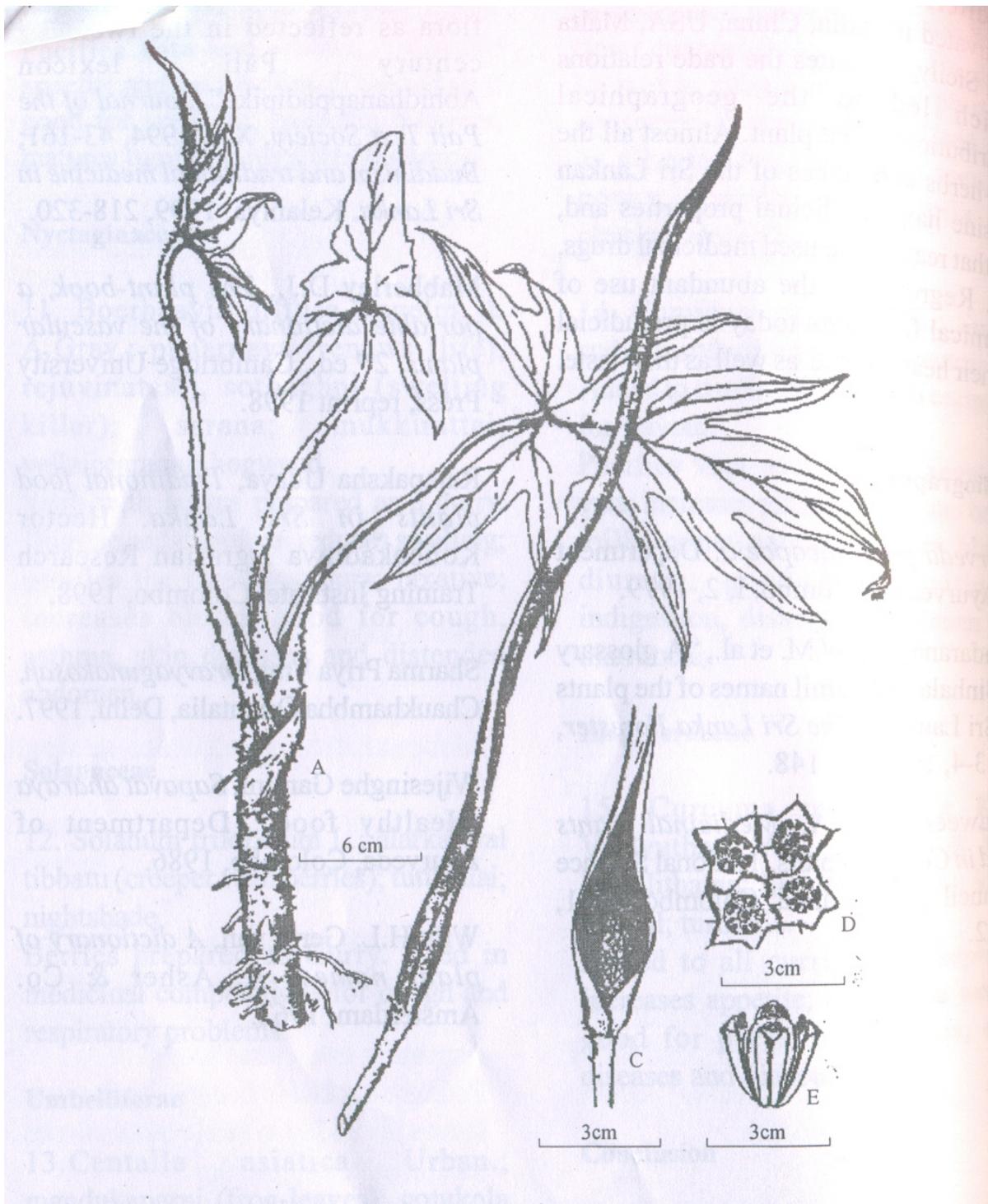


Fig.1 *Lasia spinosa*. A, aerial portion of a plant with a part of the rhizome and leaves. B, young spathe. C, older spathe showing the spadix at the time of dehiscence of the pollen. D, surface view of the flowers. E, lateral view of a flower showing the perianth stamens and pistil.

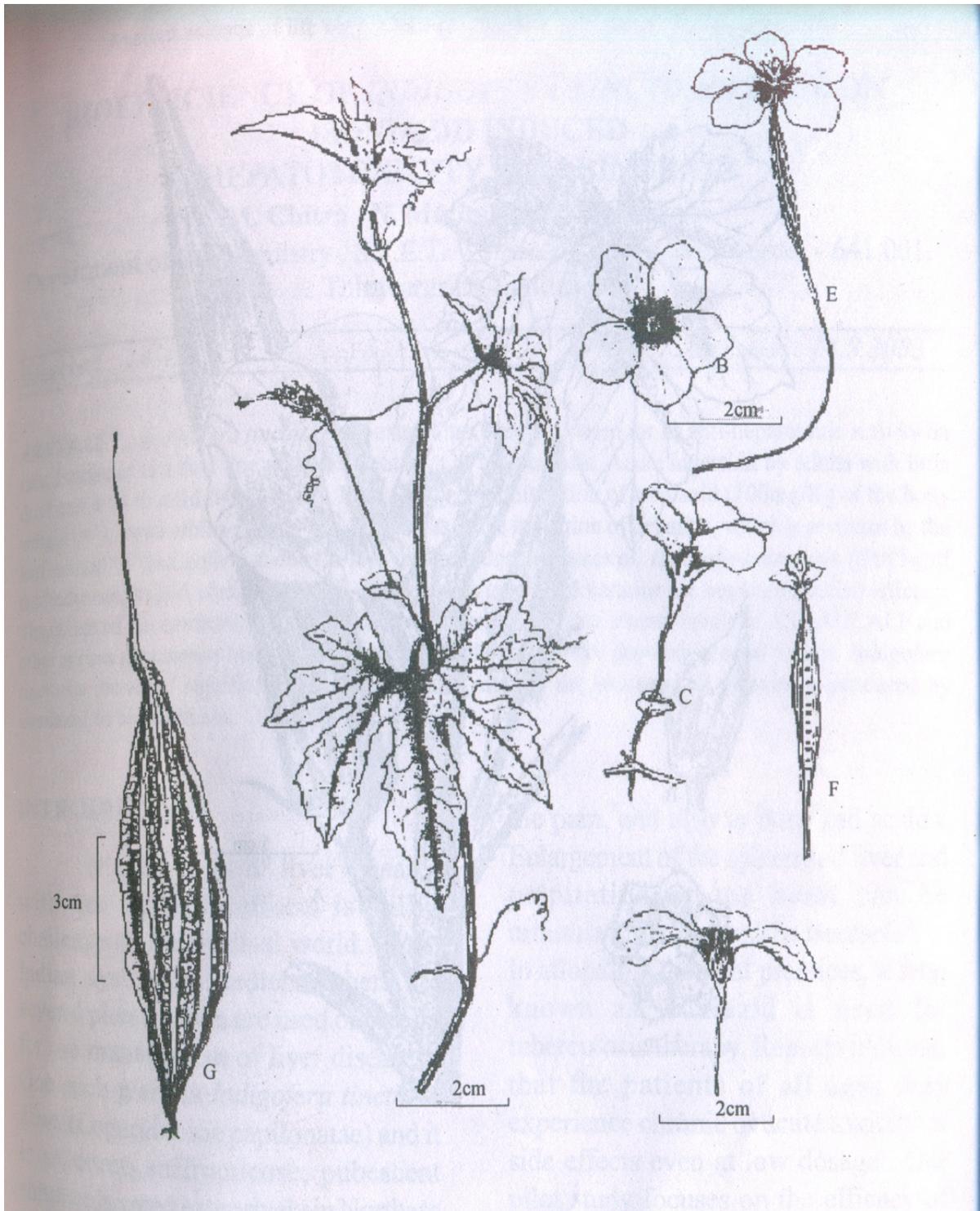


Fig. 2 *Momordica charantia*. A, portion of a plant with leaves, tendrils and young fruit. B, frontview of male flower. C, lateral view of male flower. D, longitudinal section of male flower. E, female flower. F, longitudinal section of female flower. G, fruit.



Fig.3 Hibiscus esculentus, A, upper portion of a plant, the terminal portion removed, showing a leaf, an open flower, flower bud and fruits. B, bud showing the calyx and epicalyx. C, transverse section of fruit.