



Observing and drawing edible wild plants.

Wild plants: a gift from Mother Nature

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In many poorer Surinamese families, children have the daily task to cook rice and vegetables for the entire family after getting home from school. The cost of purchased vegetables often results in very small daily portions, especially in large families. A Surinamese NGO called PRODAGRIS has tried for several years to address these issues through school garden projects. An evaluation of the schools involved showed that none of them continued with their garden after the completion of the project. School gardens are difficult to maintain for a number of reasons, such as a lack of teacher motivation and theft of materials and plants. Edible wild plants and escaped cultivated plants, on the other hand, can be a source of fresh and nutritious food, and Mother Nature provides them freely and abundantly.

In August 2002 a pilot project, supported by a poverty alleviation funding program for NGOs, started to raise children's awareness on the use of wild plants. The project targeted 205 children aged 8 to 12 years, from six different schools. The schools selected were situated in neighbourhoods with predominantly low incomes and large family structures, two in the capital of Paramaribo and four in surrounding communities in Suriname.

Learning about wild plants

Training material was developed by lecturers and students from the University and Teachers College, together with one agricultural extension officer. The course consisted of five one-hour sessions in a time frame of three months.

Lesson 1: A very short story about two children walking home from school, in which one of the children shows the other how to find "vegetables" in the wild.

Lesson 2: Children are asked to bring edible wild plants from home. The difference between cultivated, wild, and escaped cultivated plants is explained.

Lesson 3: Finding wild food in the school surroundings.

Lesson 4: Growing wild or escaped edible plants at home.

Lesson 5: Cooking experience.

Under the guidance of their own teacher and assisted by the project team members, children and teachers learned how to identify edible plants and where to look for them, for example close to their homes and in vacant lots along the road on their

way to school. The objective of the project was not only to educate children about this free, healthy source of food, but also to inspire teachers and parents.

During the classes there was a lively exchange of information between children, teachers and project-team members. Occasionally, a child provided new information on the use of a plant – for example the preparation of young leaves from "olive" trees (*Zizyphus jujuba*) as a vegetable. The children often provided information on a home application of certain plant parts for medicinal purposes. The children also learned that even though conditions at home may be limited for gardening, it is still possible to grow vegetables at a small scale. Plants such as *bitawiwiri* (*Cestrum latifolium*), *agumawiwiri* (*Solanum americanum*) and *klarun* (various *Amaranthus* species) can be gathered from the wild and then grown at home. A few *dyari pesi* (*Vigna sinensis*) seeds, planted in the soil in a small corner or at the verges in front of their home, will eventually yield a vine with edible plant parts (young leaves, young pods, seeds). The children learned how to transfer small *klarun* plants to a bucket filled with soil. They also learned how to recycle a one litre plastic bottle into a garden scoop, and how to cut larger sized empty containers to plant vegetables in. The training was completed by organizing a drawing and writing competition.

Finally, a cooking class was organized at school, with the help of teachers and parents. Children brought leaf and fruit vegetables they had gathered, and a number of dishes were prepared by combining plant parts from wild and (escaped) cultivated plants. Children, teachers, parents and project-team members enjoyed working together in preparing, tasting, and eating the various dishes at school.

Final exhibition

After the project, the children's drawings, poems and short stories, together with photographs and large buckets containing growing wild plants, were exhibited at one of the local theatres in Paramaribo. The children were transported to the exhibition by bus, where they were able to meet other pupils who took part in the project. They enjoyed a variety of activities such as puzzling and painting. The children's visit to the exhibition was concluded with the announcement of the winning drawings and poems in the school competition.

Results

The project, which ended in January 2003, was well received at the national level, as shown by the coverage by various media. There were articles in three local daily newspapers, an interview on *World Radio Broadcasting* (the Netherlands), spots of the exhibition in television news programmes and a television talk show interviewed project-team members and some children.

An illustrated book has recently been published as a result of the project, describing 30 different edible plants that can be found wild. The book, currently only available in Dutch, is based on the "working book" initially developed for the teachers, together with the other results and discoveries made during the project.

Currently, follow-up activities are limited but the author would like to communicate with others who might be interested in collaborating on similar projects, especially in the region.

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