

AIBEKA **(*Abelmoschus manihot*, syn. *Hibiscus manihot*)**

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Also known as *ibeka*, *sunset muskmallow*, *sunset hibiscus*, *sweet hibiscus*, *pee tree*, *lettuce tree*, *Qld greens*, *Eve's greens*, *Bele* (Fiji), *Tororo aoi* (Japan), *Pele* (Polynesia) and *Ailan kapis* (Vanuatu).

Aibika belongs to the **Malvaceae family**, it's a fast growing, woody shrub that can reach a height of up to 3 metres and comes from Southeast Asia. There are many different varieties and they are distinguished by their leaf form. The large leaves can be deeply lobed or entire and they can grow to 30cm across. The stems can be green or red and the flowers are pale yellow with a dark purple eye.

This plant is a perennial in the sub tropics and the tropics but an annual in cooler climates. It was formerly considered a species of *Hibiscus*, hence the synonym *Hibiscus manihot*, but is now classified in the genus *Abelmoschus*.

It is best propagated from cuttings as the flowers rarely set seed. It will grow in full sun to part shade and needs a lot of water so best to keep it well mulched to maintain a moist root run. It will grow well in a large pot standing in a deep water tray. The flower buds and leaves are both edible, raw or cooked.

The leaves are very nutritious as they contain protein (with 11 essential amino acids),

iron, potassium, magnesium, calcium and, like most green leaves, also contain vitamin A, B1, B2 and C. The leaves contain mucilage, that is what gives it the glutenous or slightly slimy feel in your mouth when eaten alone. This substance is supposed to be good for the stomach, lungs and nervous system.

Two big leaves daily will supply you with all your green needs. The Fijian health department claims that the aibika leaf has 20 times more vitamin A than cabbage and lettuce. In addition, if you are a rat and are given a 15% aibika diet, your bones will increase in density. How's that!!

The leaves can be eaten raw (use the smaller leaves in a salad or sandwich) or cooked. The quickest and simplest method of cooking is to wash the leaves, place in a heavy based saucepan and cook over moderate heat until wilted, stir during this time. You shouldn't need to add water as there will be sufficient water clinging to the leaves after washing them.

They can also be stir fried (add last if using other vegetables), added to soups & stews and generally used like spinach. It can be used as a wrap, like a cabbage or grape leaf, to contain a filling so it's a very versatile vegetable.

The best thing about this plant is having fresh greens throughout the summer. Freshly picked leaves can be stored, in a plastic bag, in the refrigerator for 2-3 days. Just keep the plant well watered throughout summer and you'll be amply rewarded as it produces a large quantity of leaves.

References (books):

ABC Gardening Australia FLORA the Gardeners Bible (ABC Books);
RFCA newsletter No 27; Kai Kai A Guide to Bush Foods, markets and culinary arts of Papua New Guinea by R J May (this book is in our library); Earth Garden magazine No140 July/August 2007.

References (internet): Wikipedia and michie.net;

www.news.com.au/sundaymail/story/0,23739,20779739-5003419,00.html