

## Fruit and vegetables from the tropical forest

**T**HE PHILIPPINE forests provide many little-known fruits and vegetables which are nutritious and a good source of income. Some also serve as shade trees. These useful plants include lipote (*Syzygium polycephaloides*, Fig. 1), talakatak or Philippine chestnut (*Castanopsis philippensis*), unggu (*Elaeocarpus calomada*), gepas (*Sarcandra glabra*), Fig. 2), niog-niog (*Ficus pseudopalma*, Fig. 3), babagkong (*Telosma precumbens*, Fig. 4), and limbabao (*Broussonetia luzonica* (Fig. 5).

### How the plants are used

The fruits of lipote are eaten fresh. They are also preserved in some areas of the Philippines (Laguna and Samar). Fruits are sold in Liliw, Laguna for about



Fig. 1. Lipote (also known as Jambolan Plum, Java Plum, Jambu) (*Syzygium cumini*)

This medium-to-large evergreen tree has glossy green leaves and white flowers. It bears clusters of round, purple fruits. It belongs to the same family as the clove.

US\$0.65/kg.

The Philippine version of the European chestnut (*Castanea vulgaris*) is *C. philippensis*. The trees of the Philippine chestnut are usually found in Quezon and Nueva Viscaya provinces. Mature nuts are available during the rainy season (from September to December). The nuts are cleaned and roasted in the same way as the European chestnut, and have a similar taste.

The processed unripe fruits of unggu are eaten in Liliw, Laguna in the same way as processed green olives. Unripe fruits are harvested in early September and ripe fruits are harvested later in the same month. Fruits cost about US\$0.83/kg.

The young tender leaves of niog-niog are cooked in the Bicol Region with coconut milk, and eaten with fish, meat or other vegetables and red peppers. In

Fig. 2. Gepas (*Sarcandra glabra*)

This species is a shrub which grows to a height of around 1m. The leaves are pleasantly aromatic when crushed. It is commonly used as a beverage, made into a kind of tea.



Laguna, the leaves can be sold for about US\$0.74/kg.

Flowers of *babagkong* and *kapas-kapas* are used in meat and vegetable dishes in the central Philippines. The flowers are more expensive than vegetables such as cabbage, eggplants, or squash. They sell for about US\$1.85/kg. The flowers of *babagkong* are abundant during the rainy season (June to December) while *kapas-kapas* flowers are common in summer (February to May).

## Value of the forest food plants

The ripe fruits of *lipote* are rich in Vitamin C. They are sweet and have a pleasant taste. Because of this pleasant taste, ripe fruits are eaten by various species of birds and fruit bats. The tree's brightly colored fruits make it an ideal ornamental plant. The leaves are not attacked by moth larvae, making this tree an excellent shade tree. The trees make a good windbreak in highland areas. This species can be used as a reforestation species because of its economic and ecological contribution. On the other hand, cultivating



Fig. 3. *Niog-niog*, also known as Philippine fig, palm-like fig, or dracaena fig (*Ficus pseudopalma*) This is a small tree with long elliptical leaves. The unusual leaf formations of this plant might lead one to mistake it for a palm, hence, the name "pseudopalma" (false palm).

Fig. 5. *Kapas-kapas*, also known as *sugod-sugod* and *limbabao* (*Broussonetia luzonica*) This tall shrub or short tree is a member of the Paper Mulberry family (no relative of the true Mulberry, which produces edible berries). The broad, heart-shaped leaves are covered on the underside with a white fuzz. Paper Mulberries produce male and female, greenish-yellow flowers on separate trees. Not only can the flowers be eaten, but the sap from the seeds can be used as a substitute for laundry soap. The bark contains a strong fiber, and the leaves can be used as fodder for livestock and poultry.

Philippine chestnut may help generate jobs, especially for tree farmers and related industries.

The unripe fruits of *unggu* are soaked in a brine solution for a week before they are eaten. The ripe fruits are sweet, which is why bats and birds like to eat them. Both ripe and unripe fruits are rich in Vitamin C.

Selling leaves of *niog-niog* is profitable because the leaves command a higher price than ordinary vegetables. Growing the species is environmentally friendly because no chemicals are used in production. Trees can be established in a plantation. They can be used as an intercrop in agroforestry farms, or as hedgerows, windbreaks or boundary plantings. As a plantation crop, this tree can be established in denuded or degraded areas around the country.

*Babagkong* and *kapas-kapas* may be grown in backyards. *Babagkong* is propagated by seeds, and *kapas-kapas* by cuttings. Neither species needs any fertilizers or pesticides, thus, they are safe to eat. They are more nutritious than the common cultivated vegetables.



Fig. 4. *Babagkong* (*Telosma precumbens*) A basket of flowers picked from *T. precumbens*. This plant is a vine which bears tight clusters of white flowers. The flowers are fragrant, especially at night.

