



LEAVES

GREEN FOREVER

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Green leafy vegetables have been an integral part of the Indian diet for centuries. *Shaak*—the generic term for greens—finds mention in vedic texts and is strongly recommended as a source of *satvik* (pure) nourishment in Ayurveda. And while the list of vegetables has become limited in urban India today, the varieties of greens consumed in villages across the country are mind-boggling.

Let us begin with Jammu and Kashmir. *Haak*, a variety of spinach with a distinct flavour, is cooked using a minimalist technique. It is cooked in mustard oil, with a pinch of asafoetida, salt, green chillies and dried ginger. Tempered with red chillies, the watery soup is sheer bliss with steamed rice. *Karham* (knol khol) is cooked similarly. *Sochal*, commonly known as mallow, is also a green that has many loyal patrons.

In Punjab, *sarson ka saag* is extremely popular, and is normally consumed with *makki ki roti*. Interestingly, *sarson ka saag* is a blend of three greens—mustard, spinach and *bathua* (goosefoot/pigweed). To add a pleasant, pungent touch, radish too is blended.

Bathua, once a common vegetable in north India, has become a rarity today. Its scarcity has added to the renewed interest in this vegetable. *Bathua* is relished in *raita* and as an interestingly stuffing in *paratha*. *Palak* and *sarson* are cooked differently in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Unlike in Punjab (where it is puréed), it is prepared and served as a dry dish. In Uttarakhand, *palak ka kapha* has a texture like the *saag* in

Punjab. It is also not uncommon to pair *palak* with potatoes.

Non-vegetarians have long enjoyed delicacies such as *saag gosht* and *murg haryali*, both prepared with spinach, mustard leaves or a combination of both. Another popular green is *methi* (fenugreek). Its bitterness puts some people off, but from Punjab to Bihar, it is cooked with potatoes and peas in clotted cream-based gravy. Dried fenugreek leaves, the aromatic *kasuri methi*, are used in many recipes—vegetarian and non-vegetarian—to enhance their appeal. In addition, green coriander leaves are used in western India to prepare *kothmir ki bhaji* and in Kashmir for the peerless *dhaniwal korma*.

In Uttarakhand, *palak* is prepared as a dry accompaniment—*tapakiya/tinariya*—that is served in small quantities with rice and *dal* and vegetables like *gadheri* (yam) or *kaddu* (pumpkin). Leaves of *laai*, a local variety of mustard, and *chaulai* (amaranth) are also popular in the hill state. People in remote villages, till a generation ago, used to supplement their diet with green leaves of *shishuna* (Himalayan nettle) and *linguda* (a fern variety) collected from the forest.

These vegetables are normally consumed by the poor. Till a few years ago, it was common to use a variety of dried green leaves that were out of season. Not just *methi* and *laai*, but leaves of *mul* (radish) were dried for winter use. Another tasty way of using home-processed green leaves was to use them in the form of *badi* (sun-dried dumplings prepared by mixing the greens with lentil paste). *Paptola* and *naal badi* are prepared with *paparh* (arum) leaves and tender stems. Alas,



the practice has become almost extinct.

In eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, a number of local greens were traditionally consumed, but most of them are slowly being abandoned. Leaves of hemp (jute/*patsan*) is just one such case. In the Malwa region of central India, an exotic speciality is *afeem ki sabzi*— vegetable prepared with the leaves of poppy plants.

People in West Bengal and Odisha use a great variety of greens leaves as well. In Bengal, *poi* and leaves of pumpkin

plant are popular. *Chorchori* utilises these greens in generous measure. Dipped in batter, these leaves are deep-fried to prepare *bhaja* (fritters) in Odisha and no meal, including the legendary *prasad* offered to Lord Jagannath at Puri, is complete without *saag*. Any seasonal green can qualify to be included under this category. Often green or dried leaves are cooked with flowers. One such example is *neem ki sabzi* that is prepared with dried bitter *neem* (margosa) leaves and buds. The delicacy has many medicinal properties.

In south India and in the coastal belts, greens are mostly stir-fried and mildly cooked because deep cooking destroys nutrients. Cabbage is used mostly for preparing *poriyal* and is tempered with mustard seeds, *urad* (black gram) lentils, curry leaves and garnished with freshly grated coconut. A number of *pachadhi* (prepared by pounding the vegetables) and *kachumbar* (composed of chopped vegetables) are prepared with whatever greens are available. Both in north and south India, greens are mixed with batter and deep fried to prepare *bhajiyas*. The practice of cooking green leaves with *dals* is more popular in south than in the north. *Bachali kura pappu* is a spinach-laced dal cooked in Kerala, while *pesara pappu* is a thick lentil soup made with amaranth leaves. Sometimes greens are blended with buttermilk as in the case of *thotakur majiga tulusu* where amaranth leaves are cooked in thin buttermilk gravy. The same leaves are also used to prepare a stew without the buttermilk.

Some green leaves are only used as flavouring agents and *pudina* (mint) ranks at the top of the heap. Sour *gongura* (red sorrel) leaves are used as the main ingredient for pickle in Andhra Pradesh. *Gongura pulihora* is spiced tart rice—a classic recipe from Andhra. Amaranth leaves are also relished when stir fried as *vepudu*.

There are two other leaves that merit mention. Soya is an aromatic leaf of the fennel family that is cooked with potatoes in winters. Green leaves of spring onions are also considered *hari sabzi*. Nowadays, button mushroom are cooked with spring onions and their leaves, but in the countryside spring onion leaves are cooked and served without any crutches. The same can be said of green leaves of radish, as they are used in salad or for pickling.

In other regions, lentils and *kadhi* (a yogurt-based recipe) are enriched with inclusion of green leaves. *Sagpaitha* in Awadh is just one such recipe.

In recent days there have been some concerns about consuming green leafy vegetables. Those who have high uric acid in their blood should avoid spinach and amaranth as these contain a large amount of oxalic acid. Some are worried about the hidden salt content. With the exception of a small minority, one can enjoy a variety of greens without doubts, as long as you rinse properly.

There are also green leaves that are not eaten but contribute significantly to what we cook. Parsi delicacy *paatrani maachi*, *bhappe ilish* from Bengal and *karimeen polichettu* in Kerala are all wrapped in banana leaf before being steamed or pan-grilled. The banana leaf imparts a delicate aroma and subtle flavour of its own to each of these sparkling gems. Turmeric leaves are also used similarly.

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