



**Good for the Earth, Good for People, Good for Communities**

## Chia

Chia (*Salvia hispanica* seed), a plant in the mint family, was a staple in the traditional Aztec and Mayan diet. A Mayan word, chia means ‘strength.’ The outer layer of the chia seed, made of soluble fiber, forms a slowly metabolized gel that provides a steady release of glucose into the bloodstream.

The use of chia in pagan religious ceremonies caused the Spanish conquistadors to attempt its elimination and chia almost disappeared, surviving only in small, cultivated patches in scattered mountainous areas of southern Mexico and Guatemala.

In the southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico, a related species of chia (*S. columbariae* or *S. carduacea*) was not cultivated but rather gathered from the wild. Ancient peoples of these arid regions depended heavily on chia as a staple food. One popular drink was made by mixing chia seed or seed meal into water to produce a thick, soothing concoction.

In 1991 growers, businessmen, and scientists from various countries began collaborating in the production of chia (*S. hispanica*) in a research and development program called the Northwestern Argentina Regional Project. The goal was not only to provide growers with alternative crops, but also to improve human health by reintroducing chia into western diets as a source of omega-3 fatty acids, antioxidants, protein, fiber, and minerals.

Additionally, the gel forming property of chia seed slows digestion and sustains balanced blood sugar levels, which can be helpful in preventing or controlling diabetes. For weight loss, a tablespoon of chia soaked in a cup of fruit juice makes a nutritious meal, leaving one full and without hunger for hours. Chia prolongs hydration and helps the body retain electrolytes in its fluids especially during exertion or exercise, making it beneficial for body builders and athletes. Chia also contains boron, which is needed for healthy bones and has five times more calcium than milk.

One of the most significant changes in the modern diet is in the ratio of omega-6 to omega-3 fatty acids. As our diet and the diet of the animals we eat shifted from one based on green plants to one based on grain, the ratio of omega-6 to omega-3 has gone from roughly one to one (in the diet of hunter-gatherers) to more than ten to one. There is increasing evidence that this can contribute to chronic inflammatory diseases (such as heart disease), and behavioral problems in children, and depression and memory loss in adults. To remedy this take 1 heaping tablespoon (25 grams) of chia seed dissolved in water/juice or sprinkled on foods per day.

### ***For More Information:***

- Chia: Rediscovering a Forgotten Crop of the Aztecs by Ricardo Ayerza Jr. and Wayne Coates
- The Omnivore’s Dilemma by Michael Pollan
- Food Plants of the Sonoran Desert by Wendy C. Hodgson

***\*Chia is available at various farmers markets in Arizona.\****