

Chia

Chia, the seed from *Salvia hispanica*, a plant in the mint family, was one of the main foods along with corn, beans and amaranth in the Aztec and Mayan diet before the Spanish arrived. 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. Aztec warriors would eat chia to be “able to resist the heat of the sun and the fatigue of war.”

The use of chia in pagan religious ceremonies caused the Spanish conquistadors to try to eliminate it. Chia almost disappeared, only surviving in very small cultivated patches in scattered mountain areas of southern Mexico and Guatemala.

In the southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico, related species of chia (*S. columbariae* or *S. carduacea*) were not cultivated but rather collected from wild populations. Ancient peoples of these arid regions depended heavily on chia as a staple food. One teaspoon of seed was sufficient to keep an Indian going for 24 hours on a forced march according to Edward Palmer in his botanical travels (1891) through Mexico. Chia seed was the basis of one of the most popular drinks used by Mexicans, Indians and many Americans. They dropped the seeds or seed meal into water to produce a thick, soothing drink.

In 1991 growers, businessmen, scientists and technicians from Argentina, Columbia, Bolivia, Peru and the US began collaborating in the production of chia (*S. hispanica*) in a research and development program called the Northwestern Argentina Regional Project. The idea behind the project 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 and fiber. Currently University of Arizona researchers are involved in adapting chia to modern agriculture while chia is being grown commercially in Argentina and Bolivia.

Chia is the richest plant source of omega-3s. It is high in protein, energy, fiber and minerals but low in sodium and can be stored for years with no deterioration. The gel forming property of chia seed tends to slow digestion and sustain balanced blood sugar levels, which can be helpful in preventing or controlling diabetes. If you want to lose weight, a tablespoon or more of chia soaked in a cup of fruit juice makes a nutritious meal, leaving one full and without hunger for hours. Chia also 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 contains boron needed for healthy bones and has five times more calcium than milk

One of the most important changes in the modern diet has been in the ratio between omega-3 and omega-6 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 (from grass to corn), 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 too high a ratio of omega-6s to omega-3s can contribute to chronic inflammatory diseases such as heart disease as well as learning and behavioral problems in children and depression, memory loss and PMS in adults. To remedy this take 1 heaping tablespoon (25 grams) of chia seed dissolved in water or juice or sprinkled on foods per day.

References:

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; www.eatchia.com

Chia is available at www.chiaseedandoil.com & at the Bisbee & Sierra Vista Farmers Markets
Desert Heritage Foods Program – Baja Arizona Sustainable Agriculture – July, 2006

