

## CULANTRO



*Eryngium foetidum*  
[er-RIN-jee-um]  
(*E. antihystericum*)

**Family:** Umbelliferae

**Names:** fitweed, perennial coriander, recao, long coriander, mexican coriander; jia yuán (Chinese); Ngò Gai (Vietnamese); ketumbar jawa (Malay); Herbe puante, Chadron béni, and Herbe à fer (Martinique and Guadelope), culantro cimarrón (Cuba), koulant (Haiti), culantro del monte or wild culantro (Costa Rica) and Chadon benée or cilantro ancho (Dominican Republic).

**Description:** Slender, evergreen, branched perennial with fibrous roots and lanceolate leaves 2-10 inches long, which have spiny-toothed margins. Numerous, green-white flowers with leafy bracts appearing in summer. Height and width 24 inches. It is found in the West Indies, Central America, Thailand, Southeast Asia, and West Africa.

**Cultivation:** Prefers damp, heavy soil in sun or shade. Best pH 4.3-6.8. Propagate by seed sown in spring, or by root cuttings in late winter. The container should be at least 2 inches deep because the seedlings send out a long tap root. Transplants will be ready to plant in the field around 8 weeks after seedling emergence. The seedling is easy to transplant because its root system can withstand some handling. Leaves are picked before flowering; roots of 2<sup>nd</sup>-year plants are lifted in autumn and used fresh for flavoring, and fresh or dried in infusions and decoctions. Slugs and snails a particular problem as well as mealy bugs. Blanching prior to drying the herb preserves the green color. In northern climates, the plants should be set out after the night time temperatures are 50°F or above, usually in early June. Transplants should be spaced 4 - 6 inches within the row and no closer than 6 inches apart between the rows. It is a good idea to add starter fertilizer at the time of planting. Recao can survive in poor soils with little fertilizer, but does better in fertile soils. For commercial production, the plants should be covered with a floating row cover. This is for three reasons. First, the long summer days will stimulate growth of the flower stalk. The flower stalk must be trimmed weekly or the plant will stop producing leaves. Shading the plant slows the growth of the flower stalk. The row cover should be placed on the crop in such a way that it can be removed easily and withstand weekly handling. The second reason to use row cover is to keep the leaves as succulent as possible. Leaves of recao grown under row cover have less chlorophyll and have much softer spines. The third reason is that leaves grown under row cover are cleaner than those grown without row cover. The leaves will grow as much as 10 inches long, especially

under shade. The entire rosette is harvested by cutting the leaves with a knife at the soil line. The rosette is left to grow new leaves. The cut leaves can be held together with a rubber band and sold as a bunch. The crop is sold in bunches of 6-10 leaves per bunch. They could be held together with a rubber band or twist tie. Shelf life is 3 to 4 days. After that, the leaves begin to decay and produce an off-flavor. One way to slow decay is to wrap the bottom end of the leaves in plastic with a little bit of moisture.

**History:** Symbolism: austerity

**Chemical Constituents:** 2,3,5-trimethylbenzaldehyde, 5-dodecanone, 4-hydroxy-3, 5-dimethylacetophenone, carotol. Constituents vary between Chinese, Malaysian, Cuban and Vietnamese varieties. Iron, carotene, riboflavin and calcium.

**Properties:** pungent aromatic herb that lowers fever, relaxes spasms and benefits digestion

**Medicinal Uses:** In Carib medicine as a cure-all, and, specifically for epilepsy, high blood pressure, and fevers, fits, and chills in children. In Suriname's traditional medicine fitweed (culantro) is used against fevers and flu. It is used as a tea for diarrhea, flu, fevers, vomiting, diabetes and constipation. In India the root is used to alleviate stomachache. Drink as a tea to combat stomach gas or indigestion, and for infantile vomiting and diarrhea. To prepare tea, chop 6 leaves; pour boiling water over them and allow to steep for 15 minutes. Take in doses of ¼ cup throughout the day.

**Research:** Anticonvulsant activity was demonstrated with a hot water extract of leaves and stems in mice at a dose of 3.0 ml (Simon and Singh 1986). A water extract of the entire plant, at a dose of 6.492 gm/kg, was shown to have antimalarial activity (*Plasmodium gallinaceum*) in chickens (Spencer et al. 1947)

**Culinary Uses:** Important in Latin American cuisine and increasingly used in SE Asia in soups, curries, and rice and fish dishes. Flavor

similar to that of coriander but stronger. This is one of the herbs that gives Caribbean foods its distinct flavor. The Puerto Rican condiment sofrito uses recao as a key ingredient. The roots and leaves are used in Thai cooking. Add as many washed and chopped leaves as required for taste. Fresh leaves can be used in salad. Chopped leaves are added in soups and stews. Recao can be dried and stored. Unlike cilantro, recao retains its flavor and color after drying.

### **Recipes:**

#### **Asian Pesto**

2 cloves garlic, roasted  
2 Tbsp coarsely chopped ginger  
1-2 serrano peppers, stemmed and seeded  
2 Tbsp lemon juice  
2 tsp soy sauce  
1 cup packed fresh 'Cinnamon' basil  
½ cup fresh coarsely chopped Vietnamese balm leaves  
¼ cup rice paddy herb leaves, loosely packed  
¼ cup packed fresh culantro leaves  
¼ cup chopped scallions, green part only  
¼ cup peanut oil  
1 Tbsp dark sesame oil  
shichimi togarashi or red chile powder to taste  
toasted sesame seeds, for garnish

To roast garlic, roast unpeeled cloves for 15 minutes in a 350F oven, then squeeze out the soft inside. In a food processor fitted with the metal blade, purée the roasted garlic, chopped ginger, and peppers with the lemon juice and soy sauce until smooth. Add the basil, Vietnamese balm, rice paddy herb, culantro and scallions. Process until smooth. Combine the two oils in a lipped measuring cup. Slowly add to the processed herbs the peanut and sesame oils in a thin stream, scraping down the sides of the bowl, until the mixture is well blended. Transfer the mixture to a small bowl and add the shichimi togarashi or chile powder. Lay a piece of plastic wrap on the surface of the pesto while you prepare the dish it is to accompany. Add garnish and serve immediately. (Exotic Herbs)

#### **Sancocho (Spanish Thick Soup)**

4 plantains

6 potatoes  
 1 yucca  
 1 onion  
 2 stems recao  
 3 Tbsp Adobo (Spanish seasoning)  
 2 envelopes Sazon (Spanish seasoning mix)  
 4 Tbsp vinegar  
 ¼ lb Auyama (Spanish pumpkin)  
 corn (frozen or fresh)  
 ½ chicken cup up  
 4 pork chops  
 ½ lb chunk meat  
 ¼ lb Longaniza (Spanish sausage)  
 Avocado  
 Rice

Fill pot about ¾ of water. Add meats (except for the sausage). Cut onion in cross and add to water, also the Auyama, 2 stems of Recao, Adobo, Sazon and vinegar. Let boil for a while. Taste if it needs more seasoning. Add a little more of Adobo, Sazon and vinegar to your taste. When the Auyama has softened, mash it like mashed potatoes and add it back to the water. When meat is ¾ cooked, add vegetables. The plantains have to be cut up in round pieces, the potatoes in slightly small pieces and the yucca in the same order. When everything is in the pot and the water juice has thickened slightly, the Auyama will help thicken it, it's almost ready. Add the sausage and the frozen corn (if using fresh add at the same time as the rest of the vegetables). Serve with rice and slice of avocado.

### **Chicken and Rice**

1 chicken cut up  
 6 cups rice  
 10 cups water  
 2 stems recao  
 2 cups beer  
 3 Tbsp tomato paste  
 ½ lb ham cut in chunks  
 1 can peas  
 2 envelopes Sazon (Spanish seasoning)  
 4 Tbsp vinegar  
 3 Tbsp Adobo (Spanish seasoning)  
 2 Tbsp green olives  
 1 large onion  
 plantains

Boil the 10 cups of water. Add the seasoning, 2 envelopes of Sazon, 4 Tbsp vinegar, 3 Tbsp Adobo, 2 Tbsp olives, tomato paste and the recao. Then add the onion (cut up in four pieces). Add the chicken, cut up or shredded. Taste for seasoning and add more if necessary. When it comes to a full boil, add the 6 cups rice. Lower flame before rice is cooked; take the chunks of ham and add them to the rice, then cover and complete cooking. Serve with fried plantain. (Cut plantain in quarters, ¼ inch thick. Fry them lightly, then smash them and fry over again until crisp.) Kidney beans can be served over the rice and chicken.

### **Pasteles**

4 lb pork, very lean  
 Salt  
 ¼ cup annatto oil  
 10 culantro leaves  
 1 tsp oregano  
 1 red bell pepper, chopped in fine strips  
 1 medium onion, chopped  
 10 sweet peppers  
 6 cloves garlic  
 2 large tomatoes, chopped  
 8 oz tomato sauce  
 24 stuffed Spanish olives  
 salt and pepper to taste  
 Pastele dough:  
 7 lb white yautia (taro root)  
 4 lb green plantains  
 ¼ cup annatto oil  
 3½ Tbsp salt  
 store bought banana leaves (washed)

Wash and pat dry the meat. Chop into very small pieces and season with the tablespoon of salt. In a large saucepan add the remaining ingredients (NOT THE DOUGH INGREDIENTS) and cook for about 5 minutes, then add the meat, bring to a boil, lower heat and simmer for about 30 more minutes or until meat is tender. Peel the yautia and green plantains. Grate them until you have a smooth dough type mixture. Slowly add a little of the meat sauce to the dough and mix well. Add ¼ cup Annatto oil and the salt to the dough, mix well and set aside. (dough should be smooth

but not to soft.) Brush the leaf with a little annatto oil and place 6 or 8 tablespoons of the dough mixture in the center of a 12x12 piece of banana leaf which has been washed. (these leaves can be purchased at most Spanish stores and are pre-cut. But if you can not find them, you can use parchment paper, which is also available at the Spanish market.) Spread the mixture in the center of the leaf and form a well in the center of the mixture. In the well; place 2 tablespoons of the meat mixture. Carefully fold the dough so the meat mixture is covered over. Then fold the leaf to form a rectangular shape and tie with string (tight enough where the mixture won't come out of the pastel). Repeat this until all of the dough mixture has been used. There should be about 36 pasteles. In a very large pot, place 5 liters of water and 3½ tablespoons of salt; allow to boil. Place about 12 pasteles in the boiling water and allow to boil for about 45 minutes. Immediately remove from water once they are cooked.

### **Sofrito**

½ medium onion, peeled  
2 medium cubanelle peppers, washed and the seeds removed  
1 cup chopped aji dulce peppers  
1 medium head of garlic, peeled  
4 full large stems of cilantro, washed  
4 recaio leaves, washed

In a blender or food processor, chop onion. Add cubanelle peppers and chop. Continue same with aji dulce, garlic, cilantro, and recaio. Pour mixture into jar with tight fitting lid and keep in refrigerator 3-4 days. Use in recipes which call for sofrito seasoning

### **References:**

Encyclopedia of Herbs & Their Uses, Deni Bown, Dorling Kindersley, 1995; ISBN: 0-7894-0184-3

Exotic Herbs, Carole Saville, Henry Holt, 1997; ISBN: 0-8050-4073-0

Rainforest Remedies, Rosita Arvigo and Michael Balick, Lotus Press, 1993; ISBN: 0-914955-13-6

### **Resources:**

Companion Plants, [www.companionplants.com](http://www.companionplants.com)  
plants

Crimson Sage, <http://www.crimson-sage.com>  
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