
Recipes for Velvet Beans -- and a Caution!

Milton Flores has sent us a 77 page recipe book that was developed by El Rosario, one of World Neighbors' projects in Honduras. (Milton directs the International Center for Information on Cultivation of Cover Crops (CIDICCO), an affiliate of World Neighbors.)

We are making this available in spite of misgivings about the safety of consuming larger amounts of velvet beans. If there is any question, why publish recipes? Consider the following guidelines. Has there been a failure of the bean crop in your area, but velvet beans are abundant? If so, it is almost certainly better to make use this high protein (about 30%) bean than to suffer hunger or protein malnutrition. I believe it was just such a situation which first prompted the development of these recipes. Is the food situation a bit less desperate than that, but people still do not have enough to eat? If so, I would use velvet beans in moderation and not every day. Are there plenty of alternative sources of protein? If so, do something else with the velvet beans. See discussion below for more details.

When I visited the World Neighbors project in Honduras a few years ago they were in the midst of a drought. The crop of common beans had failed, but the velvet beans produced abundantly. This led to efforts to incorporate velvet bean into local recipes. Additionally, new recipes were developed based on their work with soybean, after changes to improve the taste and consistency.

Why the concern for safety? Some years ago I read a study that set out to determine in what ways college graduates differed from those who had not been to college. The only point I remember is that they supposedly had developed a greater tolerance for ambiguity. There is certainly something in mankind that wants things to be clear cut and plain. What politician has ever won an election by saying "On the one hand But then on the other hand...."? We crave certainty. In the case of the safety of velvet bean, I hope you have developed a tolerance for ambiguity. I know what you want to hear is either do or do not eat it. At present the answer is ambiguous.

We have discussed the issue of whether velvet beans are safe for use as a human food in past issues (EDN 24-4). My own conclusion was that I would cautiously eat them if I did not have enough to eat or my diet was lacking in protein. Otherwise I would eat them infrequently if at all, and then only in small quantities. A recipe book can make everything look very straightforward and safe. It has not been proven to be safe. But it is safer than trying to live without protein. (I imagine other beans could be made to fit into these interesting recipes).

Milton shares his own experience. "Although many people are eating the velvet bean in more than one way, we are careful to caution them to use it with care. We have observed symptoms such as drowsiness and headaches. This is especially true when people mix several [velvet bean] dishes at a time. In my own opinion, some people are more sensitive than others. I can stand only one cup of velvet bean coffee and one or two velvet bean tortillas at one time. When we have cooking demonstrations, with several dishes prepared and offered at the same time, it is usual that a couple people report symptoms like those I have mentioned. Most people, however, do not seem to be affected in any way."

Keep in mind that there may be differences between varieties. It is conceivable that beans that have been stored a long time may be less toxic. Considering how widely velvet beans are being grown and how productive they are, it is a shame that the research community is not addressing these problems more vigorously. Thankfully two professors at two different undergraduate Christian colleges are working on it as they are able, but their research budgets are minuscule. We will keep our network abreast of their findings.

How about velvet bean coffee? In EDN # 24 I made the following recommendation concerning "coffee" made from velvet beans. "If buying coffee was hard on my budget, I would drink velvet bean coffee in moderation. If neither I nor anyone in my community had problems, I might drink it freely after a time." Based on tentative findings from Dr. Myrman at Judson College, I would change that. Until further research has been done I personally would not drink more than an occasional cup of velvet bean coffee. Dr. Myrman has told me verbally that there is 250 mg of dopa in an 8 ounce cup of velvet bean "coffee" (sometimes misleadingly called "nutricafe.") The beginning dosage for treatment of Parkinson's disease is 600-800 mg dopa. So a person drinking 3 - 4 cups of velvet bean coffee a day is easily getting this amount. [A question to doctors in our network - are there medical applications for Parkinson victims for whom medicines are not available?]. We eagerly await his written report and will share the findings and a summary of the literature in an upcoming issue of EDN.

(By the way, CIDICCO has a new report on using velvet bean as a green manure in citrus plantations. It is available free from them in Spanish, and soon in English.)

How are velvet beans used? Use of velvet beans as an inter-crop with corn has doubled or even tripled yields of corn by peasant farmers in some situations. The degree of improvement presumably depends on how poor the soil was initially. The vines also make a great forage and keep down weeds during the dry season. The mulch remaining after they are cut down keeps the soil more cool and moist for the new corn crop. You are referred to EDN 23 for a discussion of its use. If you do not have that issue, request our Technical Note on green manures. We always have trial seed packets available for our overseas network.