

Drumstick (*Moringa oleifera*): A Multipurpose Indian Vegetable¹

C. RAMACHANDRAN,² K. V. PETER³, AND P. K. GOPALAKRISHNAN⁴

The Hindustan centre of crop origin is the cradle of many economically important vegetable crops. Ash gourd (*Benincasa hispida* Cogn.), bitter melon (*Momordica charantia* L.), kundru (*Coccinia indica* L.), pointed gourd (*Trichosanthes dioica* L.), snake gourd (*Trichosanthes anguina* L.), egg plant (*Solanum melongena* L.), hyacinth bean (*Dolichos lablab* L.), sword bean (*Canavalia* sp.) and many other vegetables originated in this part of the world. There is yet another vitamin-rich, mineral-packed and nutritious vegetable of this tropical and subtropical centre of crop origin grown by the *dravidians* and later by the *aryans* in each and every home yard, and presently disappearing from cultivation, called variously drumstick, horse radish tree, radish tree, and West Indian Ben. The name drumstick derives from the shape of the pod, resembling the slender and curved stick used for beating the drum. Probably the name radish tree originates from the pendulous, slender and thin shape of the immature fruits of the tree resembling very much the siliqua of the radish.

BOTANY AND NOMENCLATURE

The plant is a medium-sized tree belonging to the Moringaceae. The family consists of the single genus *Moringa*, and the botanical name of the tree is *Moringa oleifera* Lam. The family is distinguished by parietal placentation, 3-valved fruit, elongated, non-dehiscent berry and winged seeds. Philips (1951) reported 4 species while Pax (1936) and Puri (1942) reported 10 species, native in the Old World tropics. Bessey (1915) and later Wettstein (1935) placed the family under Rheadales. Hutchinson (1926) included it in Capparidales while Datta and Mitra (1947) considered it more closely related to the Violaceae of the Violales. Engler (1964) concurred with Bessey and put it under the suborder Moringineae, order Rheadales. There are 2 common species, *M. oleifera* and *M. concanensis*, the former being the vegetable species. *M. oleifera* is distinguished by leaves usually tripinnate, leaflets 12–18 mm long, petioles yellow or white without red streaks, and the tree is medium-sized. *M. concanensis* is characterized by bipinnate leaves, leaflets 15–30 mm long, petals with red streaks or reddish at base, and the tree is large.

ORIGIN AND DISTRIBUTION

The tree is indigenous to northwest India. It is found growing wild in the sub-Himalayan tract from the river Chenab eastwards to the Sarada and in the tarai tract of Uttar Pradesh in India. The tree is widely distributed in India, Egypt,

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² Junior Assistant Professor.

³ Professor of Horticulture.

⁴ Professor of Horticulture (Olericulture), College of Horticulture, Kerala Agricultural University, Vellanikkara, Trichur, Kerala, India.