

# ASIAN VEGETABLE AND HERB Guide

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## Buk Choy

*Brassica rapa var. chinensis*

Alternate Name: Chinese Chard

Buk choy literally means "white vegetable" in Cantonese. Baby buk choy is a dwarfed variety up to 20cm tall and is sometimes called "Moonbuk" or "Gongmoon buk choy". It is almost like two vegetables in one, the thick, juicy stems adding an interesting texture to a dish while the dark green leaves add a different consistency and flavour. Buk choy is commonly steamed, stir fried or boiled in soup. When cooking buk choy, it is best to add the stems first as they take longer to cook. Slicing them diagonally helps to expose the inner surfaces which will soak up the sauces and flavours in the surrounding dish.



## Centella *Centella asiatica*

Alternate Names: Pennywort, Gota Cola, Arthritis Plant

Centella has a long history of use in traditional remedies for various ailments. It grows vigorously in the home garden, and can become a pest under warm, wet conditions. In Vietnam and Thailand, the leaves are crushed and made into a sweetened drink. It can also be added to soups, stews or eaten raw as part of a salad.



## Ceylon Spinach *Basella alba*

Ceylon spinach is a vigorous tropical vine with fleshy leaves. While Ceylon spinach can generally be used in the same way as European spinach, it is important not to overcook it or it can become slimy. Only the leaves and young stems are eaten. Like okra, Ceylon spinach has mucilaginous qualities which can make it useful for thickening soups and stews.



## Chi Qua

*Benincasa hispida var. chieh-qua*

Alternate Name: Hairy Melon

While Chi qua may be unfamiliar to many Australians, it is one of the staples of the Chinese diet. Chi quas are distinguished by their coating of fine hairs and need to be handled carefully, as the hairs can cause skin irritations. Very young chi quas can be eaten raw, but they are more usually cooked. They have a mild, pleasant flavour not unlike zucchini. They can be peeled, then chunks added to soup or sliced and stir fried or barbecued. They are particularly good when the seedy core is scraped out and the gourd stuffed with pork, prawns or other flavoursome mixture before baking or steaming.



## Choy Sum

*Brassica rapa var. parachinensis*

Alternate Name: Chinese Flowering Cabbage

Choy sum and "baby" choy sum can be easily distinguished by their bright green oval leaves and yellow flowers. Its mild flavour, crunchy stems and soft leaves make it a good match for many different foods and flavours. Simply wash and roughly chop the whole bunch then stir fry, steam or add to soups, stews or even curries. Bunches can be kept for up to a week in a plastic bag in the fridge.



## Coriander

*Coriandrum sativum*

Alternate Name: Cilantro

Coriander is a native of southern Europe rather than Asia. Widely used in Asian cuisines, it is also common in South America, India and the Middle East. In America it is usually referred to by its Spanish name "cilantro". All parts of the plant are eaten, including the roots, stems, leaves and seeds. Fresh leaves lose their flavour and aroma quickly when cooked, dried or frozen, and should be used soon after purchase due to their short storage life. Add them at the end of cooking, or use as a fresh garnish on salads, soups or other cooked meals.



## Curry Leaves

*Murraya koenigii*

Curry leaves are generally sold as small stems with dark green tapered leaves growing on either side. They are harvested from a small tree native to India and are mainly used in Indian and Sri Lankan cuisine. While the leaves have quite a strong aroma when fresh, this develops into a rich curry flavour when cooked. They are usually fried in oil with other spices before being added to meat or vegetables. Leaves can be frozen for later use, which maintains their flavour better than drying.



## Dong Qua

*Benincasa hispida*

Alternate Name: Winter melon

Dong quas look somewhat similar to watermelons. They can grow to be extremely large, weighing up to 20kg. Dong quas and chi quas are the same species, and both are covered with a layer of fine hairs when young. However, as the melon matures, the hairs are replaced by a white waxy layer, allowing it to be stored for several months with little loss of quality. It has a rather bland flavour and is mainly used in soups and stews or stuffed with a flavoursome filling and baked.



## En Choy *Amaranthus tricolor*

Alternate Name: Chinese spinach

A mild tasting leafy vegetable. The commonest variety has colourful red and green leaves, but a smaller fully green variety is also sold. It has a very short storage life, so needs to be kept cold and eaten as soon as possible after purchase. Like beetroot, en choy's bright red colour comes from anti-oxidants called betalains. These are water soluble, so cook lightly to preserve them as well as retain maximum flavour and texture.



## Fish plant *Houttuynia cordata*

Alternate Name: Lizard's Tail

This is a plant with a truly unique flavour and aroma. The small, heart shaped leaves have a pungent, fishy flavour and aroma. In Vietnam they are commonly included in salads and used as an ingredient in rice paper rolls. It is occasionally used to make tea, and is an ingredient in a wide range of folk remedies.



## Fu Qua

*Momordica charantia*

Alternate Name: Bitter Melon

This unique vegetable can be very bitter, a property which appeals to many Asian palates, but sometimes less to European Australians. Appearance ranges from white to dark green with bumpy to deeply pointed and ridged skin, and 5 - 30cm long. To reduce its bitterness, cover thin slices with salt before rinsing and cooking. It is often prepared by removing the seeds and pith, stuffing with a meat mixture and steaming. Sliced it can make an attractive addition to stir fries and soups, or can be blanched and used in a spicy salad.



## Gai Choy *Brassica juncea var. foliosa and rugosa*

Alternate Names: Chinese Mustard and Swatow Mustard

Part of the large and diverse mustard family. Leaves can be more or less crinkled, the thick ribs and veins more or less prominent, and colour ranges from bright to dark green. They also vary in flavour, mature plants can be extremely peppery. However, baby gai choy can be eaten fresh and is a delicious way to spice up a salad, giving it a hot, mustardy bite. Varieties with thick, fleshy leaf ribs are often preserved by pickling with garlic and chilli. Leafier types can be used in stir fries, stews and soups, and combined with other strong flavours such as tamarind paste or oyster sauce.



## Gai Lan

*Brassica oleracea var. alboglabra*

Alternate Name: Chinese Broccoli

People may be familiar with gai lan or "Chinese broccoli" from yum cha, where it is served steamed with a drizzle of oyster sauce. Gai lan has been grown in Europe, as well as Asia, for thousands of years. The whole plant can be eaten; stems, leaves and even flowers. It is great in a stir fry, added to soup or even steamed and served with hollandaise sauce.



## Galangal *Alpinia galanga*

An aromatic rhizome of the ginger family, galangal is widely used in Thai, Vietnamese and Indonesian cuisines. Young, bright pink pieces have the best flavour and texture; older rhizomes tend to be woody, making them difficult to cut. It has quite a different flavour to ginger, and tends to be harder. As a result, it should either be sliced very finely, ground to a paste, or added to cooked dishes as larger slices and chunks which can be removed before serving. Galangal is an essential ingredient in Tom Yum soups and Thai curry pastes. Although it dries out quickly at room temperature, it is also cold sensitive, so cannot be stored for more than a few days in the fridge.



## Garlic Chives

*Allium tuberosum*

Garlic chives are sold as bunches of either flat, garlic flavoured leaves, or round, flower bearing stems. While the leaves may be used fresh in Vietnamese cuisine, garlic chives are usually lightly cooked due to their strong flavour. They make a flavoursome addition to noodles, soups, omelettes and vegetable dishes. The flowering stems are particularly good stir fried, while the leaves are often used in Chinese pancakes.



## Ginger *Zingiber officinale*

The aromatic rhizomes of ginger have been used to flavour foods since the time of Confucius. Very young ginger has thin, golden skin and pinkish shoots. This is the type of ginger which can be candied, pickled or steeped in water to make ginger tea. Mature ginger has brown skin and a more fibrous texture. Peel, then slice thinly, grate or shred to add flavour to many dishes. Ginger is often used with garlic and chilli as a flavour base for marinades, or mixed with spring onions and coriander to flavour steamed fish. Young ginger, finely sliced, can even be added raw to salads.



## Gow Gee *Lycium barbarum*

Alternate Name: Goji (Berries)

A native to China and Japan, gow gee grows best in warm to temperate conditions. Many cultivars are quite thorny and can be trimmed to make a dense and impenetrable hedge. Gow gee is commonly used as a vegetable in Chinese cuisine, with the leaves often added to soup. However, in recent years it is the berries which have received the most attention. Commonly marketed in Western countries as "Goji berries", these small, red dried fruit are considered by some to be a potent source of antioxidants as well as possessing other nutraceutical properties.



## Green Mango

*Mangifera indica*

Green mango is simply an unripe fruit, usually a variety such as Nam Doc Mai. The flesh is fragrant with a sweet / sour flavour. A popular way to prepare the fruit is to add herbs, lime juice, fish sauce and other ingredients to grated flesh and eat as a salad. In many parts of Asia the flesh is often eaten simply thinly sliced with salt and chilli.



## Green Papaya *Carica papaya*

The large torpedo shaped papaya variety is used unripe, its flesh cut into long shreds and seasoned as a salad vegetable. In North East Thailand and Laos it is pounded and heavily seasoned with chilli, sugar and fish sauce with peanuts, snake beans and tomatoes as an accompaniment to the staple sticky rice. Green papaya can also be pickled with fish or shrimp. When ripe, its flesh is yellow and edible as a fruit although it has a somewhat unpleasant smell. Cantonese use the semi ripe fruit in both sweet and savoury soups.



## Kaffir Lime *Citrus hystrix*

A highly aromatic, tropical citrus, the kaffir lime has glossy double leaves which can be used to add a wonderful citrus flavour and aroma to marinades, curries and even salads. The grated rind of the small, knobbly green fruit can be used similarly, while the juice can give a powerful lime kick to sweet and savoury dishes. Both leaves and fruit can be frozen for future use, or refrigerated for several days.



## Kang Kong *Ipomea aquatica*

Kang Kong is closely related to "Morning Glory vine", and like its relation, can become a weed under damp conditions. The plant has long, pale green hollow stems that float on top of the water, while the darker green leaves can be slender or heart shaped. Kang Kong has a mild flavour and can be used raw in salads as well as lightly cooked. In many parts of Asia it is eaten stir fried with chilli, garlic or a savoury paste. To prepare, slice the stems from the stems and strip the leaves diagonally. Stir fry the stems for a minute or so before adding the leaves and cook only until the leaves are just wilted. Serve immediately.



## La Lot *Piper sarmentosum*

A close relative of pepper, the deeply veined, glossy leaves of la lot can be eaten raw in a salad or blanched as a vegetable. La lot is somewhat pungent and spicy in flavour, with a more delicate texture than the closely related "Betel leaf". The leaves are often used in Thai and Vietnamese cooking, where they are used as wrappers for savoury snacks such as spring prawns with ginger, or lemongrass beef.



## Lemon Grass

*Cymbopogon citratus*

Lemon grass is an essential ingredient in much South East Asian cuisine. Originally from the tropics, it can be grown in temperate areas given a warm, sunny position, rich soil and plenty of water during summer. Use the basal white to light green part of the stem, peeling away the outer leaves to expose the firm core. Slice finely, then mince or crush slightly to maximise the flavours. It is often used as a part of curry bases and marinades but can also be added to soups, stir fries and stuffings.



## Long Coriander

*Eryngium foetidum*

Sometimes called cilantro, this aromatic herb has an aroma similar to coriander. A short lived annual, it is quite easy to grow in a warm spot where it is protected from direct sun during the day. Long coriander is widely used in many parts of South East Asia, often shredded finely and used as a garnish. Like coriander, it can add flavour to curries, mixed vegetables or simply be mixed with rice.



## Lotus Root *Nelumbo nucifera*

The lotus plant is one of the most useful plants in all Asia. All parts can be eaten, from the flower buds and seeds to the stems and tubers. Lotus roots themselves have a mild, slightly nutty flavour. However, they absorb the flavours of sauces and other ingredients, and so can be quite flavoursome. They also stay crisp and crunchy after cooking, adding an interesting texture to many dishes. Tubers are usually lightly peeled then sliced thinly to make the most of their delicate, lace like appearance. An excellent ingredient in a stir fry, they also make an interesting addition to soups and salads.

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**Okra** *Hibiscus esculentus*

Alternate Name: Lady's Fingers

Okra is a vegetable people generally either love or hate. The seed pod of a hibiscus, it is usually green, although purplish varieties are also sometimes available. The ridged pods are covered with downy fur and contain small white seeds. However, it is the plant's mucilaginous properties that make it unique. Sliced and cooked for a long time, this "goo" dissolves and thickens the dish, as in the famous southern USA dish gumbo. Alternatively, okra can be cooked whole, quickly and with an acidifier such as lemon juice to keep it slightly crunchy, as in a stir fry or tempura.



**Pandanus**

*Pandanus amaryllifolius roxb.*

This spear shaped leaf has a nutty flavour and is used to flavour desserts. When crushed, it can be used as a green colouring agent and is available fresh, frozen, canned or in essence form. The pale green jellies, cakes and soy drinks in Asian food stores are coloured and flavoured with pandan. Fresh leaves can be knotted and added to cooking oil or when steaming sticky rice. They are also wrapped around chicken pieces and grilled.



**Pak Choy**

*Brassica rapa var. chinensis*

Alternate Names: Shanghai Chinese Chard, Shanghai Buk Choy

Pak choy is a green stemmed variety of buk choy. However, it is quite different in texture and flavour; the stems are more flattened and less juicy, the leaves are more tender and the whole vegetable has a milder flavour. Pak choy is one of the best vegetables to include in a stir fry. Simply roughly chop the whole plant and add it to the dish near the end of cooking. Alternatively, add to soup, curry or casserole. Pak choy can also be sliced in half and steamed (whole if small), then drizzled with a little soy sauce and sesame oil or butter to make a spectacular side dish to any meal.



**Pea Eggplant** *Solanum torvum*

Small, green pea eggplants are produced in clusters on a plant which is so vigorous as to be widely considered a weed. Unlike other eggplants, the fruit have tough skins, hard flesh and a bitter taste. Their main use is to be added whole to Thai curries, to which they add texture as well as flavour. They can also be pounded into a spicy paste for use as a side dish.



**Perilla** *Perilla frutescens*

Alternate Name: Shiso

Perilla is most closely associated with Japanese cuisine, although it is also used in other parts of South East Asia. Both green and dark red varieties are grown, of which the green has the stronger flavour. Perilla has a slightly spicy flavour, variously described as somewhere between basil, mint and even anise. A single, perfect leaf may be used as a wrapper for sushi, while red leaves can add colour and flavour to salads. The red leaves are also used to colour pickles pink, while both red and green varieties are popularly served tempura style, combined with pickled sour plums (umeboshi) or rolled with rice and seaweed.



**Shallots**

*Allium cepa var. aggregatum*

These small golden brown to red onions have a crisp texture and delicious, mild flavour somewhere between onion and garlic. They can be pounded into flavour bases for soups, marinades and curry pastes, sliced and used fresh in salads or dried and crisp-fried for use as a fragrant garnish, especially for soups or rice crepes. Crisp-fried shallots are available commercially.



**Seng Qua**

*Berinccasa hispida ssp.*

Alternate Name: Long Melon

Seng qua is similar to chi qua but tends to be lighter coloured and smooth skinned instead of hairy. Peel and slice thinly or cut into chunks. Try basting thin slices with chilli, garlic and soy and grilling on the BBQ. Store in a cool place for up to a fortnight.



**Shui Qua** *Luffa cylindrica*

Alternate Name: Sponge Luffa

The shui qua is closely related to the sin qua and has a similarly mild flavour and spongy texture. Young, tender shui quas can be cut in half, the seedy centre scooped out, then stuffed with a mince or rice mixture and steamed or baked. Sometimes shui quas are allowed to grow very large on the vine, then dried to make the "loofahs" that we use in the bath or shower.



**Sin Qua** *Luffa acutangula*

Alternate Name: Ridged Luffa

Sin quas originated in India, but are now grown in many parts of the world. They are long slender gourds distinguished by the 10 ridges which run from tip to tail. Good quality sin quas should be bright, glossy and firm. Sin quas have a slightly spongy texture and mild flavour somewhat similar to zucchinis. After peeling to remove the hard ridges, the sin qua can be steamed, stir fried, grated into an omelette or fritter or added to soup.



**Snake bean**

*Vigna unguiculata subsp. sesquipedalis*

Snake beans can be used similarly to green beans. They have a slightly dry texture compared to green beans, so while they can be simply steamed and served on their own, they are best added to other dishes. They are a key ingredient in Thai fish cakes and keep their texture well after cooking, making them a useful addition to stir fries, stews or casseroles.



**Snow Pea Shoots**

*Pisum sativum*

These shoots are the harvested tips from freshly germinated snow pea seeds. They are often initially grown in the dark to keep them tender, then finally exposed to light to allow the green leaflets to develop. They have a mild 'pea like' flavour and crunchy texture. Snow pea shoots are a wonderful addition to a salad and make a great garnish. They can be stored for up to a fortnight in the fridge so long as humidity is kept high.



**Spearmint**

*Mentha viridis, M. spicata*

This hardy perennial plant has slightly crinkled leaves that are more tapered and a lighter shade of green than common mint. It is often included in the mixed bunches of Vietnamese herbs. Spearmint leaves can be infused and used in tea. The oil is also used in confectionery.



**Spring Onion** *Allium fistulosum*

Alternate Names: Bunching onion, green onion, welsh onion

Probably originating in north-western China, this plant may be one of the first Asian vegetables to be grown in Australia, having been brought here during the 1850's gold-rushes by Chinese immigrants. These onions are distinguished by their hollow stems and lack of bulb development even when allowed to fully mature. Relatively mild, these make an ideal alternative in any dish where bulb onions would dominate the meals flavour, including pasta, salad, sauces, quiche and many more.



**Sweet Potato** *Ipomoea batatas*

Like taro, this is a staple food in many parts of the tropics. While Australians are familiar with the tubers, the leaves and shoots are widely used as a leafy green vegetable in many parts of Asia. The tubers themselves have high nutritional value; orange fleshed varieties are particularly high in Beta Carotene, pro-vitamin A and antioxidants. It also has a relatively low glycaemic index, more suitable for diabetics and dieters than other carbohydrate sources. Sweet potato has many uses. It is fantastically sweet if baked, makes tasty chips, colourful mash, creamy soup, smooth textured sliced tempura, or simply boil or steam until tender and eat with some cracked pepper, butter or lemon juice.



**Taro** *Colocasia esculenta*

Taro has been cultivated for many thousands of years and is one of the staple foods of the Pacific as well as many parts of Asia. The tubers should be peeled before use due to the presence of calcium oxalate crystals concentrated in the skin. They can then be used much like potatoes; boiled, baked, fried, mashed or a thousand other uses. While their texture can be a little dry, they have a sweet nutty flavour and are relatively high in vitamins, minerals and protein.



**Taro Shoots**

*Colocasia esculenta*

Taro shoots are the stems of certain species of taro. They should always be cooked before eating because they contain calcium oxalate crystals, even small quantities of which can cause burning or swelling when eaten. The thin skin should be peeled before use, then the foamy textured flesh can be boiled or added to soup. In Vietnamese cuisine, chunks of stem are commonly added to fish soup.



**Thai Basil** *Ocimum basilicum*

Alternate Name: Asian Basil

This tropical variety of sweet basil is easily recognised by its purplish stems and flower spikes. It has a distinct aniseed perfume and flavour and features prominently in both Thai and Vietnamese cuisine. Roughly tear or chop the leaves before adding to Thai style stir fry or Vietnamese salads and soups.



**Thai Round Eggplant**

*Solanum undatum*

These small eggplants have a similar, mild flavour to larger varieties, but can be full of seeds, giving them quite a different texture. Usually about the size of a golf ball, they come in various shades of green, white and purple. Thai eggplants are usually quartered and added to curries, but may also be stir fried with chilli.



**Tung Ho** *Chrysanthemum coronarium*

*coronarium*

Tung ho is a true chrysanthemum, similar to the varieties commonly grown as ornamental garden plants. Although chrysanthemums originated in the Mediterranean, it is only in Asia that they are used as a vegetable. Edible chrysanthemums are particularly popular in Japan and China. The leaves are usually picked while the plants are small and tender. Tung ho is highly aromatic and has a pleasant, succulent texture but can be very bitter, especially if overcooked. It is best lightly steamed or stir fried with other ingredients, such as beef or strongly flavoured fish.



**Turmeric**

*Curcuma domestica, C. longa*

Turmeric root is a member of the ginger family and has a similarly intense flavour. Dried turmeric is a common colourant in foods (E100) and the plant has many traditional medicinal and ceremonial uses, especially in India. The flavour and aroma of fresh turmeric is quite different to the dried powder often used in cooking, and adds a rich spicy flavour and golden colour to any dish. Grate or slice thinly and grind into a paste for use in curry bases and marinades.



**Vietnamese Mint**

*Persicaria odorata*

Not a true mint, this herb has long, pointed green leaves with distinct purplish markings. The leaves are extremely pungent and have a hot peppery taste, and is therefore used sparingly in both hot and cold dishes. It is often added fresh to Vietnamese salads and soups. In Malaysia it is used in noodle dishes and soups. It is an essential ingredient in the spicy soup "laksa"; with the result it is sometimes called "laksa leaf".



**White & Green Radish**

*Raphanus sativus*

Alternate Names: Daikon, Lo Bok

White Radish may be long and slender, short and stumpy or even almost spherical and can reach up to 5kg in weight. White radish is usually less hot and peppery than the red radishes familiar to Europeans but can still be quite strongly flavoured. They are usually cooked but can also be used raw in salads. Peel first to reduce pungency then grate with mix with soy sauce to use as a dip with Japanese dishes, pickle with other ingredients or make into savoury cakes and steam. Also used in casseroles, soups and stir fries. Can be stored for several weeks in a plastic bag in the fridge.



**Wombok**

*Brassica rapa var. pekinensis*

Alternate Name: Chinese Cabbage

While the green leaves can be slightly peppery, the thick white ribs are sweet and juicy. The inner leaves are particularly tender and succulent. Perfect for use in a coleslaw or shredded on a sandwich or hamburger. Shredded it is also a key ingredient in dumplings and rolls. Korean relish, kim chee, can be made from wombok pickled in salt, garlic and chilli. It can also be used in soups, casseroles or stir fries. The leaves can be used as wrappers for other foods during steaming. Stored in a plastic bag in the refrigerator, it can stay fresh for at least 2 weeks.



**Yam Bean** *Pachyrrhizus erosus*

Alternate Name: Jicama

Yam bean or "jicama" originated in Central and South America, but is now grown widely in many parts of Asia. The white flesh is crisp and juicy, with a mild, slightly sweet flavour. After peeling, it can be thinly sliced and eaten raw in a salad. It is a great addition to a stir fry as it does not soften with cooking, adding a crunchy texture while tending to absorb other flavours in the dish. Yam bean can be stored for several weeks in the fridge, although its flavour deteriorates over time.



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