

Spotlight on Agriculture

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Cowpea *The African Bean*

INTRODUCTION

When people write "beans" on their shopping list, they usually buy a tin of "baked beans in tomato sauce" or a packet of dried beans for stews and other recipes. These beans are usually referred to as common bean or sugar bean and belong to the *Phaseolus* family. They originate from Southern America, but are meanwhile widely grown all over Africa and imported to Namibia from neighbouring countries, especially South Africa. However, if we look a bit more carefully on the shelves of shops with a wider range of products, we may also come across a packet of "black-eyed beans", a type of cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata*) that belongs to the *vigna* family. Cowpea is actually the only true "African Bean" found in our shops and are in deed one of the most ancient crops known to man.

ORIGIN AND IMPORTANCE



Cowpea or "omakunde" as it is known to Northern Namibia's Indigenous People, originates from North-eastern Africa (Ethiopia) and its domestication is linked with millet and sorghum. From there its cultivation spread all over Africa and with traders and even to India and further. Until today, it is probably the most important legume crop in African subsistence farming systems. The major production area in the world is West Africa with Nigeria alone producing an estimated 2 million tonnes (world total dry grain production is estimated by FAO to be ca. 3.3 million tonnes). On other continents cowpea has major production areas in Brazil, West Indies, India, United States, Burma, Sri Lanka, Yugoslavia and Australia.

COWPEA IN NAMIBIA

Although not so well known and commonly used in the Central and Southern parts of Namibia, cowpea is widely grown and used in the Northern Communal Areas. It is estimated that 95 % of farmers in the North-central Regions and more than 80% in Kavango plant cowpea, mostly intercropped with cereals such as millet (mahangu) and sorghum. Our farmers have realized since many generations that cowpea, through its deep-reaching tap root, is well adapted to the harsh Namibian environment and tolerant to the high temperatures and the low and sporadic rainfall. Its traditional uses range from the consumption of cooked green leaves, fresh pods and dried seeds to the use of cowpea stover as feed for livestock. Surplus production of cowpea is sold on the open markets of the North, but also in Windhoek, Walvisbay and other urban centers. With a protein content of approximately 25 %, cowpea is the non-livestock owner's "meat" and considered a good food for children.

THE FUTURE

Considering the good adaption of cowpea to our agro-ecological conditions, the existing production knowledge among our farmers and the additional benefits of cowpea as a leguminous crop to improve and maintain soil fertility in our cereal dominated crop production systems, an increase in the production areas of cowpea would be desirable. To put this into practice, two major production constraints, pests and low producer prices, need to be addressed. The susceptibility of cowpea to pest attacks could be reduced through the promotion of early maturing, pest tolerant cowpea varieties and improved agronomic practices, including integrated pest control. The increased production costs resulting from improved production systems, however, need to be recovered from increased producer prices, which could be achieved through the export of cowpea and the promotion of cowpea with an appropriate marketing strategy at national level. In Nigeria an average of 20 kg cowpea are consumed per person per year! Namibian cowpeas should not only be available on open markets, where they are selling for as little as N\$ 5 to 10 per kg, but also to the more exclusive urban population in supermarkets, where they could easily compete with their imported black-eyed bean, which are selling for N\$ 25 and more per kg.

PREPERATION OF COWPEA DISHES

Just try one of these West African recipes and put some real African touch to your diet!

Akara

Ingredients: 2 cups dried Cowpea
3 medium size Onions finely chopped
1 whole, finely chopped Chili Pepper or
Chili Powder
Salt
2 Maggi stock cubes

Method:

1. Wash the cowpea and soak them in water for about 30 minutes.
2. Remove the skins.
3. Add a bit of water so that you can blend the cowpeas into a fine paste (with a blender, mill, mortar or flat stones).
4. Add the onion and chili and blend again.
5. Add salt and Maggi stock cube and mix the ingredients. Add water if necessary to get a smooth dough.
6. Then drop spoonful of dough into hot vegetable oil and deep fry until brown.



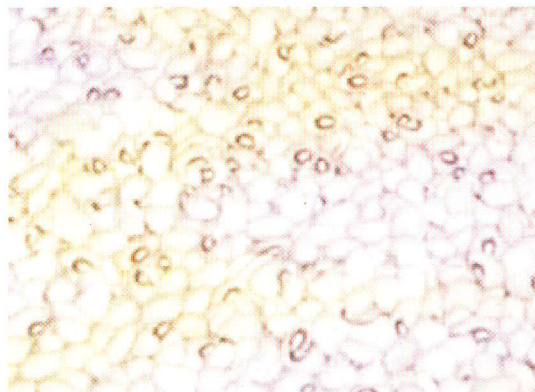
A plate of deep-fried Akara

Cowpeas with pumpkin

Ingredients: 1 cup Cowpeas
2 cups pumpkin, cut into pieces
1/2 litre water
Salt and pepper
1 Maggi stock cube

Method:

1. Boil cowpeas in the water for 25 minutes.
2. Stir in the pumpkin, add seasoning and stock cube.
3. Cook until tender and water dries up.
4. Serve hot or cold.



Moin Moin

Ingredients: 1 cup Cowpeas
1 Onion, chopped
1/2 teaspoon Hot pepper
1 tablespoon vegetable oil or groundnut oil
Salt
1 Maggi stock cube

Method:

1. Repeat steps 1 - 3 as for Akara.
2. Add the onion and a little hot pepper and blend it again.
3. Pour into a bowl, add salt, Maggi cube and vegetable oil and mix it very well.
4. Grease flat pan with vegetable oil, pour the bean mix into it, bake in the oven for 45 minutes on a high heat.

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