

4 Cashew



Crop type

The cashew tree *Anacardium occidentale* originates from NE Brazil but is now widely grown throughout the warm, humid tropics for its nuts and the cashew fruits (known as 'apples'). Cashew 'nuts' are not true nuts in the botanical family sense, but seeds, referred to as kernels. Cashew kernels are surrounded by a double shell containing anacardic acid resin, a potent skin irritant chemically similar to the toxin found in the related poison ivy. The shells and resin must be carefully removed to avoid harm at consumption stage. Nevertheless, cashew is a far less frequent allergen to the general population than true nuts or peanuts.

Cultivation and uses

West African countries together are the second largest producer of raw cashew nuts in the world, particularly Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau and Benin. Other important African producers are Tanzania and Mozambique. However, little value is added to the cashews grown in West Africa, with less than 10% of raw cashews actually processed. Developing the cashew sector therefore has the potential to create jobs and help reduce poverty in rural communities. One cashew tree produces between 200 and 300 cashew kernels in a year (2-3 kg), with average yields of around 900kg per hectare. Benin produces an estimated 45,000 tons of cashew kernels per year, with around 4% processed locally. Cashew kernels are Benin's second most important agricultural export after cotton, accounting for 10% of total export earnings.

Cashew kernels are mainly used whole for the snack market as a roasted and salted snack. Due to its rich and unique flavour, cashew is seen as a superior nut and retail prices reflect this. However, cashew is becoming of more interest to food companies, as an ingredient for biscuits, cereals, chewy bars and is also promoted as a topping on ice-cream. In Brazil, juice from the cashew apples is sold as a healthy fruit drink. Traditionally, Amazon Indians have used many parts of the cashew tree for medicinal purposes, as plant compounds are potent antibacterials.

Processing and marketing

The Organisation for the Promotion of Organic Agriculture in Benin (OBEPAB) works with over 3,000 organic cotton farmers, almost half of whom are women. The Beninese farmers are keen to market their other food crops grown in the organic rotation and reduce their dependency on cotton as their single source of income.



OBEPAB field agents amongst cotton and cashew, Aklampa district, Benin. Credit: OBEPAB



Cashew trees bordering a cotton field in Benin. Credit: OBEPAB



Food crops grown by organic cotton farmers in West Africa









Cashew seems a good bet as the trees are planted along field borders to control soil erosion and can be maintained fairly easily. Cashew kernels are harvested at a different time of year than cotton picking so farm families can easily manage the labour requirements. Cashew is rarely used in the Beninese diet and therefore does not conflict with local food security provision.

There is increasing demand for organic cashew kernels and oil in European and regional markets, plus more consumers and food companies are taking an interest in sourcing from African smallholders, supporting farm families through 'trade, not aid'. The rapidly expanding certified Fairtrade market sector also represents an attractive market for OBEPAB and the farmer associations it works with, especially as Beninese kernels have long been reputed for their high quality.



Cashew kernels. Credit: PAN UK

Recipe: Broccoli with garlic Butter and Cashews

-  675g fresh broccoli, cut into bite size pieces
-  80g butter
-  1 tablespoon (15ml) brown sugar
-  3 tablespoons (45ml) soy sauce
-  2 teaspoons (10ml) white vinegar
-  large pinch of ground black pepper
-  2 cloves garlic, minced
-  50g chopped salted cashews

Place the broccoli into a large pot with 2.5cm water in the bottom. Bring to the boil, and cook for 7 min, until tender but still crisp. Drain and arrange broccoli on a serving plate. While the broccoli is cooking, melt the butter in a small pan over medium heat. Mix in the brown sugar, soy sauce, vinegar, pepper and garlic. Bring to a boil, then remove from the heat. Mix in the cashews, and pour the sauce over the broccoli. Serve immediately.



Mother and child, cotton village, Benin.

Credit: PAN UK



Fibre, Food & Beauty for Poverty Reduction is a joint project of PAN Germany, PAN UK, OBEPAB from Benin and Enda Pronat from Senegal. It aims to raise awareness about the many different food crops grown by organic cotton farmers in Africa and help them to find better marketing options for these, in local or export markets.

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<http://www.pan-uk/foodAfrica>

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