

2 Bissap



Crop type

Several species of hibiscus shrub (known as roselle or sorrel in the West Indies and bissap in Senegal) are grown in the tropics for their flowers, used for traditional culinary and medicinal purposes, while fibres extracted from the stems can be used as a substitute for jute.

It takes around 6 months for the plant to produce flowers and farmers then harvest the thick, fleshy calyces, the outer whorl of sepals at the bottom of each flower which protected the young blossom. The dried calyces are deep crimson in colour and form the main hibiscus raw product for fruit drinks, herbal teas, colourings and many other uses. Dried hibiscus 'flowers' are easy to find on market stalls in most West African countries.

Cultivation and uses

The red hibiscus *Hibiscus sabdariffa* in the mallow family is widely grown in Senegal by farmers along their field borders, as an annual or perennial shrub growing to around 2.5m height. Grown almost exclusively for the domestic market, there are no accurate production figures, although the Senegalese government estimates national bissap production and consumption at 700 tons per year. In 2006, organic farmers' federation Yakaar Niani Wulli (YNW) in the Koussanar region in eastern Senegal and ecological farming NGO Enda Pronat introduced cultivation of red bissap in the borders of the organic cotton plots, as an additional source of income for farm families. To improve bissap quality and volumes, the variety of bissap grown was carefully selected, using excellent quality seeds sourced from Burkina Faso.

In Senegal, the dried calyces are made into a popular and delicious cold fruit drink, also known as *bissap*. Tasting a little like cranberry juice, with a beautiful rich red colour, it is widely available in cafes and served at home, diluted to taste, sweetened with sugar, sometimes with mint leaves or lemon slices added. The fresh green leaves from the plant are also used, like a spicy version of spinach and give flavour to the quintessential Senegalese fish and rice dish *thiéboudieune*.

Little known outside Africa, except in the Caribbean and African immigrant communities, a handful of European companies are now marketing hibiscus-based fruit drinks, promoting it as heart-healthy and an alternative to cranberry juice for treatment of cystitis. Hibiscus products are high in vitamin C and anti-oxidants known as anthocyanins, which may help blood capillary function and inhibit the growth of harmful bacteria.



Bissap flower. Credit: Enda Pronat



Farmers walking through a flowering bissap field.

Credit: Enda Pronat



Processing and marketing

Dried bissap calyces are easy to store and have a long shelf-life if dried well. Making bissap juice is very easy (see recipe below) and the calyces can also be transformed into sweet pickle, jelly and jam. More sophisticated processing into syrup or juice concentrate is possible too, with appropriate equipment.

The YNW Federation recently delivered 5 tons dried bissap flowers to a Senegalese juice manufacturer for a pilot marketing project for local 'fair trade' distribution, with a better share of the value chain returned to the farmers. The deal includes support from the company on pre-financing good quality seed and technical training. Other 'fair trade' groups in Senegal, such as the Women's Network for Organic Farming & Fair Trade (REFABEC) add value to farmers' produce by processing and preservation methods, including bissap flowers and jams. YNW farmers and Enda Pronat see bissap as one of their most appropriate crops to consider for export.



Young farmers from Koussanar, Senegal

Credit: PAN Germany

Recipe: Bissap juice

(makes 1.5 litres)

- One handful dried hibiscus 'flowers' (approx. 50g)
- Sugar
- Lemon juice or mint leaves (optional)



Pour 1 litre boiling water onto hibiscus flowers and leave to infuse for at least one hour. Strain through a fine sieve or muslin cloth to remove all solid materials. Dilute infusion with between 0.25-0.5 litres of cold water. If preferred, lemonade or soda water can be used instead to produce a sparkling juice. Add sugar to taste, plus lemon or mint if desired. Serve chilled or with ice. Bissap juice can be kept in the refrigerator for several days.



Dried bissap calyces. Credit: Britta Pichler



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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