



A Taste of Home

WHEN I PRESENTED chef Osama Herkal with a bucket of freshly harvested molokhia greens from my farm, he tenderly hugged the stalks and buried his head in the vibrant emerald leaves. It'd been eight years since he'd last touched the plant. Osama and his wife, Falak, hadn't seen or tasted fresh molokhia since they fled their home in Damascus, Syria, as refugees after he was arrested for participating in demonstrations. For them, the cooked leaves of the molokhia plant provide an essential taste of the home they had to leave behind.

You may know molokhia (*Corchorus olitorius*) by its English name, "jute," and recognize it as a widely cultivated fiber crop. My partner and I have a rustic, store-bought jute rug on our porch, for example, where we sit and pull molokhia leaves from their stalks to be used in his West African-style cooking. As an edible green, molokhia is grown throughout the Middle East, most of Africa, South and Southeast Asia, Brazil, and the Caribbean. It grows wonderfully in the warm, wet summers of our temperate climate in Philadelphia as well. While it's a perennial in Zones 10 and higher, it grows as an annual in cooler climates, such as ours.

Plants from their homeland offer comfort, joy, and hope to displaced Syrian families.

By Owen Taylor

PLANTING HOPE

There's debate about where molokhia originates, but in tropical Africa you can find the largest diversity of its close relatives within the same genus, as well as different varieties of the same species, with a secondary center of origin in Indo-Burma. It's also known as "Jew's mallow," "jute mallow," "okra leaf," "okra greens," "lalo," "saluyot," and "Egyptian spinach." You can best experience its family resemblance to okra and other mallows by the signature mucilage of its cooked leaves.

For many, including Mason Harkrader of Bear Bottom Farm in Dillwyn, Virginia, this "sliminess" is the best part. Mason's aunt Mira feels the same way, and would feed molokhia to her son's dates to make sure they could get along with the family. She'd say, "If you can't get this down, you can't hang around here!"

Mason's Catholic Syrian great-grandparents escaped religious persecution, taking a similar route as the Herkals. They first fled to Egypt, where his grandfather, Francois Moussalli, was born, and then continued to the United States in 1962. Francois was an accomplished chemist with a prosperous textile business, and he grew molokhia for many decades. His grandchildren recently rescued his molokhia seeds from 15 years of freezer storage, and have continued to grow the family heirloom. When they prepare it for meals, they first sauté onions and garlic in olive oil or lard; add cumin, cardamom, and hot peppers; and then mix in finely chopped molokhia leaves and chicken or vegetable stock. After a good simmering, they serve the molokhia over a bowl of rice, and add lemon juice and salt.

Mason and his partner, Wiley, provide several heirloom cultivars for the Syrian Collection in the Truelove Seeds catalog, including 'Francois Syrian' molokhia, 'Bronze Syrian' lettuce, and 'Haricot Rouge de Syrie' (Syrian red bush bean). They appreciate growing these Middle Eastern crops because they have some drought tolerance, which is helpful as climate and weather events become less predictable. In addition, Mason wants Syrian refugees to be able to reconnect to their homelands through these carefully tended seeds. "I have a stable living situation, and I get to keep these seeds for people who are being displaced," Mason says. "I can save [the seeds] for them to come and get when things settle down, if they ever do."

When I managed the Roughwood Seed Collection several years ago, the Experimental Farm Network gave us several varieties of Syrian seeds they'd requested from the U.S. National Plant Germplasm System in hopes of reconnecting the seeds with Syrians in the diaspora. For example, one pea was collected in 1949 in Homs, Syria, which is now known as "the capital of the revolution." During the Siege of Homs (mid-2011 to mid-2014), it was a center of resistance to the Bashar al-Assad regime, and thousands of people were killed. Historically, Homs has been a place where many cultures and faiths have lived side by side, including Sunni Muslims, Alawite Muslims, Greek Orthodox Christians, and Syriac Orthodox Christians. Within the city, there's a camp with thousands of Palestinian refugees, as well as an Armenian community descended from the approximately 20,000 Armenians who immigrated during the Armenian Genocide in the early 20th century. More recently, the landscape has changed dramatically, and now reflects its war-torn past.

As we plant the Syrian seeds of peas, molokhia, squash, lettuce, and more, we hope for an end to the horrors that those who continue to grow, harvest, and eat these crops face every day, and we hope refugees in the diaspora will be able to return to the land and their crops through our saved seeds.



Chef Osama Herkal embraces a gathering of molokhia. Osama and his wife, Falak, were reunited with the plant eight years after they fled from Syria.



Clockwise from above: The author grows the plant as part of the Syrian Collection of the Truelove Seeds catalog, which also includes lettuce, tomato, pea, bush bean, and squash plants; Osama and Falak Herkal share their molokhia knowledge with their community during a cooking demonstration at the Free Library of Philadelphia, showing how to prepare a traditional dish using the emerald-green leaves.





Top left: Mason and Wiley of Bear Bottom Farm, along with their mules, Gus and Ted, grow several Syrian crops on their homestead in Virginia. Right: Hoda Mansour and her children, Noor and Youssef, visit Mill Hollow Farm annually and harvest molokhia to freeze and use throughout the year, embracing a family tradition that goes back generations.



GENERATIONS OF TRADITION

On a sunny day in July, Hoda Mansour and her children made their second annual visit to our farm to harvest from our 8-foot-tall molokhia patch. Four-year-old Youssef ran around with bundles of leaves, exclaiming at the top of his lungs, while the rest of us harvested hundreds of tender new stalks and chatted. Noor, who is 13, learned where and how to snip the plant, marveled at my choice to be a farmer among the bugs and beating sunshine, and taught me the Palestinian and Lebanese pronunciations of this plant (“mlukhia” and “molokhia,” respectively, both with a fricative sound on the “kh”). When she was a toothless baby, the first food she loved to slurp down was molokhia prepared as a slimy, green stew.

For Hoda, who grew up as a displaced Palestinian in Lebanon, handling the molokhia as a child was boring, tedious work. She now wishes she’d savored every moment of sitting all day with her grandma and her sisters over tea and local gossip while plucking the leaves for the most important family meals. Now, it’s a sensory memory that she replicates with her children. When she gets home from our farm, they pluck and gossip, and freeze enough greens to last the entire year. Before they left this year, Noor told me, “I definitely want to grow molokhia, and I want to keep the tradition alive. That obviously starts with me watching my mom at every step of the way, asking her, ‘How does this happen?’ ‘How do you make this?’ ‘What’s the spice that you put into this?’ and hopefully catching on and learning how to make it for my future kids.”

When she’s ready to brave the bugs and sun, Noor will find that molokhia is easy to grow. After the last danger of frost has passed and the soil warms, she can add finished compost or rotted manure to her garden bed. She can broadcast the seeds, or directly sow them in rows, no more than $\frac{1}{4}$ inch deep, and then give them gentle, regular water until germination. She’ll thin to one plant every 6 inches or so, and eat the thinnings. Beginning when the plants are around 1 foot tall, she’ll harvest the greens on a regular basis, providing plenty for her to freeze or dry for winter.

As a seed farm, we do many things differently. We want our molokhia plants to grow large and produce seeds, so we plant them in a single row, spaced at least 1 foot apart, and trellis them with stakes and twine. This allows them to form a huge hedge with plenty of airflow and easy harvesting access. We start the seeds about four weeks early in our hoop house, and transplant them after the threat of frost has passed. This gives the plants an extra month or so to set seed pods, which look like small, thin okra fruits, or miniature green bananas. Still, in our climate, our plants may not yield ripe seeds if we get an early fall frost. Luckily, the seeds remain viable for many years, and we keep plenty of extra in storage for future plantings. I was able to germinate 8-year-old refrigerated molokhia seeds shared with me by an Egyptian family in Maryland, and Francois’ Syrian molokhia seeds were viable after 15 years in a freezer.

If you want ripe seeds for planting, leave the pods on the plant until they turn brown and crispy, and try opening a fully dried pod as you would peel a banana. If truly ripe, the angular seeds inside should’ve turned from tan to the most incredible turquoise, reminiscent of the Euphrates River or the Mediterranean Sea.

CULTURAL CONNECTION

Chef Osama proudly points out that molokhia means “royalty” in Arabic, and that many Syrians love it. The Friends, Peace, and Sanctuary project supports resettled Syrian and Iraqi individuals in the United States, and it arranged for the Herkals to share their



Tall and regal, molokhia plants can reach heights of 8 feet if left uncut. For a cut-and-come-again crop, harvest the leaves when the plant is about 1 foot tall.

foodways at the Free Library of Philadelphia. The couple demonstrated how to rehydrate imported dried molokhia from Lebanon, and how to prepare their signature dish with sautéed garlic, chicken, and broth over rice, topped with toasted pine nuts, slivered almonds, bright-green cilantro, and zesty lemon slices. It was warm, savory, and delicious, and the pungent flavors from the rehydrated leaves were unlike anything I'd eaten before.

Chef Osama also told me about molokhia's health properties. He uses this nutrient-packed food to "soften the stomach, strengthen the eyesight, and soothe the nerves," which could be important support when grappling with exile. What does it mean to be severed from your homeland and lose the everyday smells, tastes, and experiences that ground you in yourself? For my ancestors, who came from all corners of Europe, those daily and often ancient sensory memories faded within a generation or two, as a trade-in for the social rewards of becoming more American. For many people in North America who've been forced to leave their homelands, including Indigenous people, descendants of enslaved Africans, and many recent refugees and immigrants, it's a matter of cultural survival and joy to hold onto as much as possible of where they came from. In this case, perhaps that looks like losing yourself in an armful of molokhia, plucking leaves and gossiping for hours with family, or regenerating the resilient seeds from Grandpa's freezer and making a pot of strong and nourishing greens. Throughout each of these actions, the scent and taste of molokhia carries them back home. 🌿

Owen Taylor is a seed keeper, farmer, and founder of Truelove Seeds. Find him @SeedKeeping on Instagram, and peruse truly loved seeds and more at www.TrueloveSeeds.com.



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