

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

