Wild green vegetables are usually very rich in vitamins A and C and can contribute to a balanced and healthy diet. Predictably, the selection of edible herbs in wetter areas is greater, but the number available in dry or semi-arid areas can be surprisingly large. Edible herbs represent an under-utilised natural resource with significant potential for increasing food security.

Namibia has many indigenous plant species that are used here and elsewhere on the continent for food, medicine and other purposes. Knowledge of useful plants has been passed on from generation to generation. However, many plants that were used in the past are no longer used, and there are species that are utilised in some parts of Namibia but not in other areas, even though they are common in those areas.

Some uses are known only from countries other than Namibia, so original references should be consulted before a plant is consumed or used for any other purpose. In some cases, only certain parts are edible, while in others the plant may be toxic under certain conditions, have toxic parts, or need special preparation in order to make it safe for consumption.

At least 50 species of herbs occurring in central Namibia have been recorded as edible. Many of these grow elsewhere in Namibia as well. Several examples are shown here, in the first of a planned series of articles on useful plants of Namibia, based on data from the Survey of Economic Plants for Arid and Semi-arid Lands (SE Pasal) database of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

Herbs are used mostly as if they were spinach, for making relishes or vegetable dishes, or to season other dishes. Food preparation methods include mixing the herbs with milk, boiling in water to which potash or ground peanuts have been added, and drying and storing the plants for winter use. Some species are also used raw as a salad vegetable.

In addition to their importance as a supplementary food, especially at subsistence levels, in some areas many of these species are of considerable economic importance.

They are harvested from the wild and sold at local markets, providing a source of income. For many rural people, these herbs are an important source of fibre and nutrients such as minerals, vitamins and protein. In many instances they are

Wild sesame, *Sesamum triphyllum*, has edible seeds. The leaves are used as an aphrodisiac and a malaria cure, while the roots are used to treat chest and menstrual pains and are applied to snake bites. Pregnant women who suffer abdominal pains and fear losing an unborn baby take a root tea as a treatment.

The stems and leaves of *Commelina africana* are used as a vegetable. This species is also used in traditional medicine to treat pain, fits, heart complaints, venereal diseases, infertility, bladder ailments, menstruation problems, constipation and stomach disorders.

EDIBLE HERBS OF NAMIBIA
Common species of central Namibia
available earlier than cultivated crops and are particularly valued early in the rainy season. Plants of some species are dried and stored for use during the dry season, providing a useful addition and some variety to the diet. Most are used medicinally as well.

The leaves of *Corchorus asplenifolius* are eaten, and the roots are used medicinally for the treatment of impotence, loss of libido and to cure the effect of snake bites.

Roots of *Gomphocarpus fruticosus* are eaten as a vegetable dish. The roots, stems, leaves, fruit and latex are used to treat intestinal troubles, diarrhoea, fainting, tuberculosis, gonorrhoea, coryza, coughs and warts. The plant is also used to induce vomiting and as a laxative. Warning: This plant is toxic, therefore care should be taken when handling and using it.

To find more detailed information on how and when these herbs are used, please consult the SEPASAL database, freely available online at [www.kew.org/sepasalweb/sepaweb](http://www.kew.org/sepasalweb/sepaweb) and/or visit the NBRI (National Botanical Research Institute) in Windhoek, or contact us at (061) 2029111.

References:

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