

JUST as the hot, damp nights of the monsoon season give way to the much anticipated coolness of autumn, a small, yellow, six-lobed fruit begins to appear in the markets. Anyone unaware of its enormous healing potential would never guess that this innocuous looking fruit has over 30 names in Sanskrit and has been hailed since ancient times by Ayurvedic *vaidyas* and Unani *hakims* for its invaluable role in the preparation of medicines. Indigenous to India, *amla* is primarily grown for cultivation in Uttar Pradesh, and can also be found growing wild at the foothills of the Himalayas and in parts of South India. *Amla* from Benares is generally considered the best in India.

The reason that this tiny fruit is so highly treasured is that it happens to be an extremely rich natural source of vitamin C [ascorbic acid], having approximately 600 to 700 milligrams per fruit. The fruit contains 20 times the amount of vitamin C as grapefruit, and 15 times that of lemon. Its vitamin C is best utilised in the fresh state, although quite a bit of the vitamin is retained even in its dried or powdered form, or if it is placed in boiling water for no more than five minutes. An easy way to ingest it is to soak the dried *amla* in water overnight, and drink the water first thing in the morning. Some prefer to stew it, cook it as a vegetable, make *amla* jam or pickle but, unfortunately, the cooking process destroys most of its vitamin content. According to Ayurveda, this green fruit possesses cooling properties; it lowers heat in the body as well as reducing thirst, phlegm and bile.

Fresh *amla* is so sour that most people find eating it plain almost intolerable, and so many take it in the form of *amla ka murabba*, a sweetened form. Others use the tonic, *Chyawanprash*, an Ayurvedic blend of 20 herbs, including a large percentage

NUTRITION

Amla

A Concentrated Energy Source

English name: Indian Gooseberry
Botanical name: Embilica Officinalis

Paige Passano



Botanical diagram of Amla plant

of *amla*, that is available in any Indian market. In the winter season, taking one tablespoonful of *Chyawanprash* daily is said to be very effective as a preventative medicine to ward off colds and flus. *Triphala*, (“three fruits”) a potent blend of powdered *harar* [*Terminalia chebula*], *bahera* [*Bahera belleric myroblan*], and *amla* (in the respective proportions of 1:2:4) is also available in Ayurvedic shops. However, since *amla* is available and cheap at this time of year, it is worth making homemade *amla* chutney or *murabba* while the fresh fruit is in season. *Amla* pickle is also very popular, but according to Vaid S.K. Misra, it is rarely prescribed as a medicine, due to the excess oil and hot spices that are required for making the pickle. For use as a medicine, he chooses to prescribe *amla* in the form of *Chyawanprash*, *amla* chutney, raw *amla* juice, powdered *amla*, and *amla*

ka murabba. The form he chooses depends on the ailment he is treating. For example, when treating peptic ulcers, he claims that one or two *amla ka murabba* daily is most effective. When treating constipation, he generally prescribes *amla* powder followed by warm water, and for problems that stem from respiratory weakness, such as chronic cough or asthma; he generally prescribes one spoonful of *Chyawanprash* daily.

It is internationally accepted that vitamin C has a direct role in the prevention/treatment of colds and flus, due to its stimulation of the immune system, fighting bacterial, viral, fungal, and inflammatory problems of all kinds. One of the vitamin’s most important functions is the building and maintaining of collagen, a substance found in the skin, ligaments, cartilage, vertebral discs, joint linings, capillary walls, bones and teeth. Whenever there is damage to these areas, taking extra vitamin C can be very beneficial in the repair and rebuilding of collagen. Many doctors advise patients to take vitamin C supplements before and after surgery because it has been found that the healing process is faster, with the vitamin assisting in the repairing of the damaged body tissues. The same has been found for people with damaged body tissues due to accidents, burns, ulcers, and even bone fractures. In addition, *amla* is especially beneficial to the eyes and hair.

Owing partially to Linus Pauling's pioneering work on the potential advantageous effects of large doses of vitamin C, there is a great deal of ongoing research on the effects of this vitamin on the body. Many scientists have claimed that it could have a direct role in the prevention of one of the most devastating products of twentieth century living: cancer.

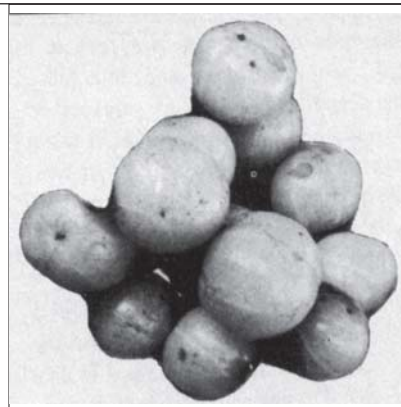
Vitamin C, taken in its various forms, is for the most part non-toxic. It does not remain in the body for long periods of time, since it passes out quickly through the urine. However, excessive intake, such as 10 grams or more daily, is associated with some side effects, though none are serious. Few people experience this because it is difficult to consume anywhere near the quantity of vitamin C needed to produce any detrimental effects. Eating 10 grams would mean eating almost 15 pieces of *amla*, or 20 (500 mg) vitamin tablets, or 300 grapefruits in one day. The most common side effect is diarrhoea, the first sign that the body's tissues are saturated with vitamin C. Other less common side effects include nausea, dysuria (burning with urination), skin sensitivity, or breakage of red blood cells. If any of these symptoms are experienced, it is wise to reduce intake.

Vitamin C deficiency is much more likely, particularly among formula-fed infants with little else in their diet, or among people who rarely eat fresh fruits or vegetables. Other groups who are often found to have insufficient vitamin C levels are smokers with poor diets, alcoholics, people with inflammatory bowel disease, and patients with fatigue. Deficiency leads to poor resistance to infection, slow healing of wounds, general weakness, loss of appetite and poor digestion. A more extreme deficiency can affect the health of the teeth and gums, stunt

bone growth in children, reduce lactation in pregnant women, and for the elderly, it could enhance symptoms of senility and increase the brittleness of the bones. Most of these problems can be avoided quite easily with a healthy diet incorporating fresh fruits and vegetables. Lightly steamed vegetables will retain the most vitamins and minerals, as opposed to overcooked vegetables, which lose a considerable amount of their nutritive value. Because of the high concentration of vitamin C in *amla*, large amounts are generally not required. Vaid Misra explains that taken daily, one or two pieces of *amla ka murabba*, one piece of the raw fruit, a tablespoon of *Chyawanprash*, or one to two grams of chutney is usually all that is required to achieve the desired results.

There is evidence that *amla* can be used for the treatment of the following conditions.

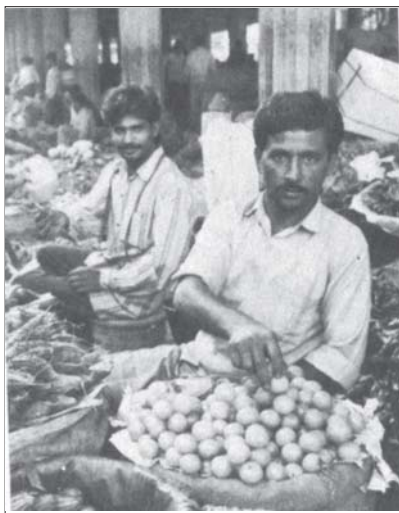
Effects of Aging: *Amla* is probably most famous for its powerful rejuvenating effect on the human form. It is recommended for treating many changes relating to the aging process — including senility, forgetfulness,



confusion, loss of strength, and fatigue. It is said to improve energy levels, memory, and alertness, and has been long extolled for promoting general liveliness. H.K. Bakhru, a Bombay-based expert in naturopathy, recommends taking a teaspoon of fresh *amla* juice mixed with honey every morning as a valuable preventative measure against numerous diseases as well as the natural promotion of vigour in the body. For rheumatism, he suggests a teaspoon of *amla* powder along with two teaspoons of *gur* [jaggery], taken twice a day for a month.

Eyes: The juice of fresh *amla* has been found to preserve eyesight, and may be helpful in treating conjunctivitis and glaucoma. A cupful of *amla* juice mixed with honey should be taken twice daily for eye problems. Even if one does not suffer from eye disease, *amla* is also used to reduce intraocular tension and weakness of the eyes. A.P. Dewan suggests soaking the dried fruit in water overnight and then splashing some of the *amla* water into the eyes, two to three times. Vaid Misra has had good results in treating patients with eye weakness using both *amla* chutney and *amla ka murabba*.

To Nourish Hair: *Amla* is the active ingredient in many shampoos due to its positive effect on the growth and pigmentation of the hair. However,



The Season for Amla

different brands of *amla* shampoo may or may not contain a sufficient quantity of *amla* to achieve the desired effect. A more sure method would be to soak dried *amla* in water overnight, strain it, and pour it over the head (as the final rinse) to nourish hair and scalp. *Amla* hair oil helps keep hair black, soft and healthy.

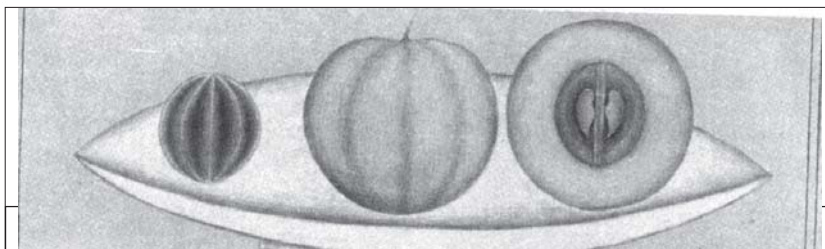
Digestive Disorders: *Amla* is recommended in Ayurveda for the treatment of constipation, gas, loss of appetite, peptic ulcers, indigestion, and dysentery. Vaid Misra has found *amla* to be very helpful treating patients who suffer from all types of digestive weakness. He attributes this to the fact that *amla* is one of the best *rasayan* - an Ayurvedic term meaning a substance that produces longevity as well as being generally strengthening to the body, both in terms of building up immunity and removing weakness. To relieve constipation and wind, A.P. Dewan, in his book *Food for Health*, suggests the following: place one teaspoon of *Triphala* in a glass of water overnight. In the morning, strain it through a clean cotton cloth and drink it. For dysentery, a tea of *amla* leaf and *methi* (fenugreek) seeds can be useful. A drink made of *amla*, lemon juice and *misri* (a type of rock sugar) is said to control acute bacillary dysentery.

Teeth: Taking *amla* is said to help in the treatment of pyorrhoea, a disease creating a loosening of the teeth and a shrinkage of gum tissue.

Diabetes: Current research is being carried out on the treatment of diabetes with high vitamin C intake. Dr Aman of the Indo-American Hospital in Mysore claims that one tablespoon of its juice, mixed with a cup of *karela* [bitter gourd] juice, will stimulate the islets of Langerhans (a group of cells that

secrete insulin), if taken daily for two months along with a restricted diet. This natural action of the body will thus reduce the blood sugar. Eye problems, often associated with diabetes, will also be prevented by *amla*.

Another suggested remedy is to take one tablespoon twice daily of equal proportions of powdered *amla*, *jamun* fruit [*Eugenia jambolana*] and *karela*.



Amla ki Chutney

3 raw <i>amla</i> (Indian gooseberries)	1/2 tsp <i>dhania</i> powder (ground coriander)
200g <i>hara dhania</i> (fresh coriander)	
50g <i>hara pudina</i> (fresh mint)	1/2 tsp <i>jeera</i> (cumin seeds)
100g <i>tomatar</i> (tomatoes)	1 tsp <i>amchoor</i> (ground raw mango)
1 <i>seb</i> (apple)	1 tsp <i>namak</i> (salt) [or to taste]
8 <i>hari mirich</i> (fresh green chilis)	1/2 tsp <i>kala namak</i> (black salt)
20g <i>adrak</i> (fresh ginger)	tiny pinch <i>hing</i> (asafoetida)
	1 tsp <i>chini</i> (sugar)

1. Rinse and chop *dhania* and *pudina*. Put aside with *hari mirich*.

2. Coarsely chop *amla* (with seeds removed), *tomatar*, *seb*, and *adrak*, then add *dhania* powder, *jeera*, *amchoor*, *namak*, *kala namak*, crushed *hing*, and *chini*. Put these ingredients on the grinding stone and crush.* Put aside in a bowl. Now crush the *dhania*, *pudina* and *hari mirich* with the stone into a paste and add to the *amla* mixture. A little water can be added when grinding to achieve the right consistency. Since there is no cooking involved in making this chutney, the maximum benefits of the *amla* and the other fresh ingredients are maintained.

This chutney can also be made in a blender, but you will sacrifice flavour. The mechanical mixer will give a more mechanical taste, she says. Though it requires much more energy to make, pressing the fresh ingredients by hand between the stones will produce the best flavour and texture.

Usha Jain

Sources:

H.K. Bakhru, *Foods that Heal* (New Delhi, Vision Books Pvt. Ltd., 1990)

A.P. Dewan, *Food for Health* (New Delhi, M/s. AC Specialist Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1991)

Elson M. Haas MD, *Staying Healthy with Nutrition* (Berkeley, CA, Elson M. Haas MD, 1992)

I am grateful for the information provided to me by Dr Ranjit Roy Chaudhary, Sham Sunder and Vaid S.K. Misra. □