

Mirliton Man - Fan of iconic New Orleans vegetable - Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - August 6, 2009 - page 01

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CORRECTION APPENDED

Lance Hill has a vision.

He sees neighbors swapping mirlitons over the back fence, like they used to do. He sees blighted lots covered with tidy horizontal trellises, where the big leaves of mirliton vines form shade canopies for neighbors to sit under, with mirlitons hanging down for the picking. He sees microbusinesses built around mirlitons, maybe even "9th Ward Mirliton Jam."

But the Mirliton Man's first step is to "restore the traditional mirliton variety that was lost over the last several years in particular. I think it was wiped out by Katrina," Hill said. "I want people to be able to grow them like they did 30 years ago, without a variety of sprays in the garage."

After the big storm, Hill and other growers, including some commercial growers in Plaquemines Parish, were trying to root new plants from store-bought mirlitons (or chayotes, as most of the country knows them). But the ones in supermarkets are from Costa Rica, which grow at elevations of 3,000 to 4,000 feet and require a lot of chemical help to survive in the New Orleans area.

"Research led to the realization that we needed to find the traditional variety," Hill said (and the heirloom ones don't have names). He spent a couple of years hunting outside the flood zone before he found Ervin Crawford in Pumpkin Center, who had gotten his mirliton starts from another farmer in Tangipahoa Parish. The original was purchased in Kenner when that town consisted of truck farms.

Hill started growing the backyard vegetables. By Mother's Day, Hill had 18 potted mirliton plants, enough to give away in a project with the Crescent City Farmers Market. Their newsletter advertised the

"Adopt-a-Mirliton" project, for serious growers who would like to raise a mirliton vine, with the understanding that they will bring half their crop back to the market and help propagate the variety.

"We got an incredibly enthusiastic response (to) Lance sitting at a table in the middle of the market with the beautiful plants he'd grown," said Emery Van Hook, director of markets at marketumbrella.org, which runs the Crescent City Farmers Market. "Our shoppers are incredibly curious and passionate about local food and local food culture, and I think it's one of the most culturally significant products at the market."

Last fall when mirlitons were in season, the market had two mirliton vendors, Van Hook said.

"They sold out almost as soon as they put them out on the table," she added.

The "serious growers" who contacted Hill were given the plants. The summer's early heat, and then the rain after it, took a heavy toll, but there have been survivors, too.

Ann Butcher's plant is now blossoming, after a period of "awful peakedness" when she thought it wouldn't survive, she said. Butcher used to live in an old house that had its own mirliton vine.

"Everybody used to have them," she said. "They're not all over the place any more. You never bought them; you used to just go pick them somewhere.

"I had been thinking of planting (mirlitons) anyway" when she saw Hill's notice, Butcher said. She doesn't garden much, but she decided she really wanted to plant things that "are hard to come by. I planted a fig tree that was really doing well, except the birds took all my figs."

When visiting Butcher in the Bywater neighborhood, Hill realized that many people have quit growing the perennial at home because so many people now have wooden security fences instead of chain link, a natural trellis.

Pamela Broom got a mirliton plant, too.

"It's still alive, bless it's little heart," she said. "It's still green and hanging in there." She is growing it in her porch garden and plans to train it up the railing.

Broom also happens to be the farm-yard director of the New Orleans Food and Farm Network. "We would love to explore working with Lance on this," she said.

Growers were asked to keep records of their vine: watering, fertilization, diseases, etc. Hill came up with a 16-page growers guide, which also includes instructions for building a sturdy horizontal trellis out of bamboo, and much, much more. Hill also has enlisted help from experts at the LSU AgCenter.

Van Hook said the CCFM Web site has posted the growers guide (www.crescentcityfarmersmarket.org) with links to Hill's Flickr site of photographs that show trellising and more. Hill also wants to partner with the CCFM on an international recipe database. He's found recipes by the dozen by searching the Internet under the vegetable's many names.

"The research he's done blows my mind," Van Hook said. "I had no idea when he came to us with this project the international significance of this food."

Hill is a font of mirliton knowledge. He has visited Reunion Island in the Indian Ocean, where mirlitons "have a cult following. Escaped slaves could take a couple into the mountains and (they) literally help them survive. They could make fabric out of it, and hats, and eat it, and could feed the tendrils to their chickens."

All parts of the mirliton are edible, it turns out. In areas without nematodes in the soil -- not the case in the New Orleans area -- the roots can be harvested and eaten. Some countries feed the

roots to cattle. In Taiwan, "dragon-whisker vegetable" is mirliton shoots.

Other names: Christophene, mango squash, pear squash, vegetable pear, choko, pepinella, pepinello, xuxu, xoxo, sayote, tayota. "Cho-cho," as it's called in Jamaica and Belize, also is a word for "pet." Guess where it's called a mirliton, besides here? In Haiti, which makes one wonder if this is another culinary link to the St. Domingue slave revolt.

This squash is Hill's hobby. Trained as a historian of the civil rights movement, he is executive director of Tulane University's Southern Institute for Education and Research, a race and ethnic relations center.

"The mirliton is an antidote from my day-to-day work," he said.

Hill said those with questions about his project may contact him through mirlitons@marketumbrella.org.

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Hill was given this recipe by a neighbor, Mrs. Simons, 25 years ago in Algiers. He changed it a bit, and strains the pulp for a lighter result. The pie is similar to banana bread, and his children used to request it instead of birthday cake.

Peel and cut mirlitons under cool running water, Hill said.

--- New Orleans Mirliton Pie ---

Makes 6 to 8 servings

3 mirlitons, (seed removed) cooked, peeled, mashed

1 stick butter, softened

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar

1 cup Bisquick

2 eggs, lightly beaten

1 teaspoon cinnamon

2 teaspoons vanilla

1 cup pecan pieces

With shortening, grease a 9-inch glass pie pan. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

With cheesecloth, a ricer or a fine strainer, strain about 7 ounces of liquid from the mirliton pulp.

Beat together softened butter and sugar until light and creamy. By hand, mix in Bisquick, mirliton pulp and eggs. Then add cinnamon, vanilla and pecan pieces.

Pour into prepared pan and bake for 50-55 minutes, until the pie is a dark golden brown on top and bottom. Pie is ready when a knife inserted into the center comes out relatively clean. Serve hot or cold with whipped cream.

--- Variation: --- Add coconut.

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Butcher said she first ate this wonderful soup in Chicago in the home of a Mexican family. It's even better the next day, after the mirlitons soak up all the flavors, she said.

Mexican Shrimp

and Mirliton Soup

2 pounds fresh raw medium shrimp

6 thickly sliced carrots

1 large onion, roughly chopped

3 mirlitons, peeled, quartered

1 to 2 canned chipotle peppers in adobo sauce

Salt to taste

Lime quarters, for garnish

Chopped cilantro, for garnish

Rinse and peel shrimp. Combine shrimp shells and 2 quarts water in a large stock pot. Over medium heat, simmer for 10 to 20 minutes to make shrimp stock. (Or, skip this step and use 2 quarts prepared chicken or vegetable stock.)

In a large pot, combine the shrimp stock, carrots, onion and mirlitons. After the carrots and mirlitons soften (15 to 20 minutes), add shrimp. Bring back to a simmer and cook for 5 more minutes, just until shrimp are done. Season to taste with salt.

Serve in bowls and garnish with squeezes of lime juice and cilantro.

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From "Maria's Cookbook," from Brazil:

Salada de Chuchu

(Mirliton Salad)

6 mirlitons, peeled and seeded

3 cloves garlic, finely chopped

1 medium onion, thinly sliced

¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil

¼ cup white wine vinegar

¼ cup chopped fresh parsley

Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

Boil the chayote in salted water until tender, about 10 minutes. Drain and combine with remaining ingredients in a serving bowl. Toss to combine and chill for at least 2 hours.

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This easy, mild-tasting side is a classic dish of Guatemala, and you can use leftover rice in it.

--- Rice with Chayote (Fritanga) ---

Makes 6 to 8 servings

3 tablespoons vegetable oil

1 medium chayote (mirliton), peeled, cut in ½-inch pieces

1 medium onion, chopped

2 garlic cloves, chopped

4 cups cooked rice

1 medium tomato, coarsely chopped

¼ teaspoon salt

Dash pepper

Snipped chives

Heat 2 tablespoons vegetable oil in a 12-inch skillet until hot. Cook and stir mirliton over medium heat until crisp-tender, about 5 minutes; remove from heat.

Add remaining 1 tablespoon oil to skillet and heat. Cook and stir onion and garlic until onion is tender, about 5 minutes. Stir in rice; cook and stir until hot, about 8 minutes. Stir in mirliton, tomato, salt and pepper. Cook and stir until tomato is hot, 3 to 5 minutes. Sprinkle with chives and serve.

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Gourmet magazine printed this recipe by Lillian Chou last November.

--- Roasted Chayotes with Garlic ---

Makes 8 servings

6 pounds chayotes (mirlitons)

3 tablespoons olive oil

½ cup thinly sliced garlic (10 to 12 cloves)

Preheat oven to 450 degrees with racks in upper and lower thirds. Wearing protective gloves, halve mirlitons lengthwise and discard the seeds. Peel, then cut lengthwise into 1-inch wedges. Toss with oil and 1 ½ teaspoons salt. Divide between two large sheet pans with sides.

Roast 30 minutes. Divide garlic between pans, then continue to roast, turning occasionally, until mirlitons are golden brown on edges, about 30 minutes more. Season with salt.

Note: Mirlitons can be roasted five hours ahead and kept, loosely covered with foil, at room temperature. Reheat in a preheated 350-degree oven about 15 minutes.

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MORE RECIPES ONLINE AT NOLA.COM: Mirliton Relish; Cho-Cho Pie, a Caribbean dessert; and Chayote and Avocado Soup.

CORRECTION / CLARIFICATION

Recipe omitted information: A recipe for Mexican shrimp and mirliton soup in Thursday's Living section did not note when to add the chipotle peppers. They should be added with the rest of the vegetables. (8/7/2009)

CITATION (MLA STYLE)

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