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Namibian leafy vegetables: From traditional to scientific knowledge, current status and applications

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INTRODUCTION

For centuries, our forefathers traditionally used vegetables that grow naturally in the wild. Many enjoyed a relish prepared with traditional vegetables. Moreover, they used these vegetables to treat a number of ailments. This is our African heritage – our Namibian leafy vegetables. These vegetables fall under a broad category that has come to be termed as leafy vegetables (LVs) or African leafy vegetables (ALVs). In this chapter, all Namibian leafy vegetables will be referred to as ALVs and NLVs interchangeably.

According to Rubaihayo (1995), ALVs are considered traditional vegetables for at least three reasons:

1. ALVs are easily found and harvested in their natural habitat.
2. The majority of ALVs have been consumed for many generations, reflecting their importance in local culture.
3. ALVs contribute significantly to the food security of rural and urban populations in many African countries. They are nutritional, having high levels of vitamins and minerals.

Leafy vegetables have been part of the staple diet in many Namibian households for years. Furthermore, traditional healers and the elderly have prescribed NLVs for the treatment of a wide variety of ailments ranging from digestive complaints to urinary tract infections, and used to aid the birthing process. Sadly, we see a growing trend of NLVs only being used in rural settings. This might be because most NLVs grow



FIGURE 7.1: Exotic and African leafy vegetables being sold at a traditional market.
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in the wild. However, younger generations are under the impression that NLVs are foods consumed only by poor or old-fashioned individuals, while modern and advantaged individuals consume exotic vegetables, such as spinach and broccoli (van Rensburg, Vorster, van Zijl, & Venter, 2007).

This chapter has been dedicated towards demonstrating that five NLVs have phytochemical properties that can be beneficial to human health on nutritional and non-nutritional levels and, as such, should not be considered inferior. It is hoped that the value of these vegetables will thus be much more appreciated. NLVs could potentially boost the income of many households. As these NLVs have been used for medicinal purposes for many years, validating their medicinal potential might make their use as alternatives to Western medicines more appealing. The five NLVs at the centre of discussion in this chapter are *Cleome gynandra* (known as *sishungwa* in siLozi and as *ombowayozondu* in Otjiherero, Figure 7.2), *Amaranthus hybridus* (*tepe* in siLozi, *omboga* in Oshindonga), *Amaranthus dinteri* (*libowa* in siLozi, *horob* in Khoekhoegowab), *Hibiscus sabdariffa* (*sindambi* in siLozi) and *Corchorus tridens* (*delele* in siLozi). English names for plants, such as cat's whiskers, pigweed or wild jute, might not be familiar to local audiences, so traditional names, such as *omboga*, *sindambi*, *mutete*, *horob* and *ombowayozondu*, which are better known, are used here.