

# Indigenous African crops are more than orphans

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A large portion of Africa's people rely on several indigenous plant species for subsistence, often using them as primary food sources for people and animals as well as for non-food purposes.

Referred to as "orphan crops" – they are not classified as major crops, and are under-researched and under-utilised.

Examples of orphan crops are: African persimmon, marama bean, prickly pear, guava and marula.

Diversifying global food sources with orphan crops can be a vital tool in combating food and nutrition insecurity.

These crops have the ability to battle a range of stresses like droughts and extreme temperatures. But invasive plant species such as lantana, chromolaena (devil weed) and Parthenium sp. (famine weed) are aggressive competitors to indigenous species and encroach on farmland affecting the composition of soil.

More than 95% of the global population's food needs relies on maize, rice and wheat; with global food security dependent on fewer than 30 plant species.

Essentially, people have lost interest in the use of indigenous crops for food and prefer the more costly commercial crops, despite high rates of poverty.

If perceptions of these orphan crops were improved, poverty in Africa could be better managed. The dependence

on major crops is disconcerting considering that Africa has its own crops.

The New Partnerships for Africa's Development (Nepad) has recognised the need for the promotion of food systems that include indigenous and orphan crops to diversify diets beyond staples such as rice.

Nepad, and its partnerships, is driving research that aims to improve diets and livelihoods of 600 million people living in rural sub-Saharan Africa.

Through the African Orphan Crops Consortium (AOCC), 101 African crop species have been identified as important food crops to be researched by 2021.

It's important to mobilise research networks within African academic and research institutions to understand the agricultural and economic value of orphan crops. Also, the focus on invasive species research in other African countries outside of South Africa, needs to be prioritised.

The only way to change this, is through fair collaboration and knowledge exchange. In so doing, we can tackle the threat of climate change and invasive species on the continent's food security using new and holistic approaches. – The Conversation.

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