

Superfood Sustenance

Rich in nutrients and possibly holding the keys to supreme health, these eight plant-based foods have garnered “super” status.

by PAUL RUBIO

The term “superfoods” first appeared in health journals and cookbooks in the 1990s, conferring a collective term to nutrient-packed natural resources touting tremendous health benefits and the possible keys to longevity. Minus the nomenclature, superfoods—plant-based foods rich in vitamins, minerals, phytonutrients, and antioxidants—had always existed within the plant kingdom, and even penetrated ancient societies and indigenous cultures across the world. However, this powerful label prompted

widespread proliferation of specific foods in hopes of unlocking nature’s secrets toward physical well-being. And though the promotion of superfoods has come under scrutiny (so much so that in 2007 the European Union banned products from using the term unless the claim can be proved) and little scientific evidence backs up professed positive effects, their natural composition still guides a path toward good health and endurance. Here, we present the origins and properties of eight highly recognizable superfoods.

FLAXSEED

If the plant kingdom ever decided to bestow a Lifetime Achievement Award on any of its constituents, it’s quite likely flax would be the winner. Back in the eighth century, Europe’s King Charlemagne required his subjects to consume it for good health. The latter half of flax’s scientific name says it all: *Linum usitatissimum* translates to “most useful.” The sturdy fibers found within the stem are what we know as linen, one of the oldest textiles in the world (in 2009 a team of archaeologists found 30,000-year-old knotted and dyed flax fibers in a cave in the Eurasian country of Georgia). The seeds, rife with fiber, lignans, and omega-3 fatty acids, headline modern literature on good health. In pressed form, the seeds produce linseed oil, which can be used as a nutritional supplement as well as a wood finisher and paint binder. To top it off, flax possesses a striking beauty in bloom, so much so it’s also grown for ornamental reasons. Blanketing hills and meadows, the petite sky-blue flowers bloom in tandem annually, creating a surreal, fairy-tale landscape. ▷

Photo: Shutterstock/Alou

QUINOA

Archaeological and anthropological studies link human consumption of quinoa to the Andean region of South America as far back as 2000 B.C. and document the cultivated plant as a nutritional mainstay of pre-Columbian civilizations. The highly adaptable grain crop has long thrived in the Andes' extreme climate, growing between 3- and 6-feet tall over expansive fields, capped by seed-lined, flowering panicles vibrantly painted in red, pink, white, purple, or black. Despite its grassy aesthetic and cereal-like seeds, quinoa is most closely related to leafy vegetables such as spinach and chard. Quinoa leaves are edible and nutritious, although it's the seeds' high concentration of amino acids (specifically lysine), B vitamins, and magnesium that have helped garner its superfood label, even prompting the United Nations to declare 2013 "the "International Year of Quinoa" to highlight global awareness of the grain's exceptional nutritional value and the role it could play in providing food security and eradicating poverty.



Quinoa (Left) Gallery, Stock/Chelsea Techler, (right) Getty, Image/Law Robertson



AÇAÍ

Throughout the Amazon rainforest, the prolific açaí palm (*Euterpe oleracea*) straddles floodplains and riverbanks, climbing more than 80 feet toward the forest canopy. Thick, branched ribbons fall below the massive fronds that crown the palm, teeming with hundreds of deep purple berries. Each berry is roughly the size of a small cherry, with a large pit at its core. The surrounding pulp is rich in fiber, antioxidants, and essential fatty acids, constituting a major food staple for indigenous tribes along the Amazon. The palms bear approximately 20 pounds of fruit biannually, traditionally harvested by climbing the palm and then chopping the fruit-filled panicle at the root. Once separated from the palm, the life span of the açaí berry is exceptionally short, meaning it must be juiced, freeze-dried, cooked, or consumed within a day or so. For this reason, fresh açaí berries aren't found outside of proximate marketplaces. ▷



CRANBERRY

Scientifically classified under the genus *Vaccinium* (whose other members include blueberries and huckleberries, among others), cranberries prefer acidic soils and cool temperatures, and prosper as low-lying shrubs around moist forests and wetlands in northern latitudes. Growing but a few inches off the ground, these trailing plants expand lengthwise up to 7 feet, producing small, leathery leaves and pink flowers that give way to tart, deep red berries teeming with phytonutrients, specifically anthocyanins and flavonoids. Long before Ocean Spray popularized the fruit, pre-Columbian Native American tribes used the wild berries in medicines and as a key ingredient in *pemmican*, a hearty protein bar made with meat and fat. It's also no coincidence that we indulge in cranberries on Thanksgiving, as Native Americans introduced pilgrims to this nutritious delight after arriving in the New World. Mimicking a natural process but on a larger scale, cranberries are now commercially cultivated in bogs, allowing the ripened berries to float to the surface once the bog floods, fostering endless seas of vitamin-rich red. ▷

Photo: Tandem Stills + Motion/Jim Meyers.



POMEGRANATE

An uncanny tolerance to drought and frost, combined with its overall malleability and longevity, has facilitated the introduction of pomegranate crops to myriad dry climates across both the Northern and Southern Hemispheres. In bloom, the branches of the 15- to 25-foot-tall trees don vibrant red flowers, which eventually give way to starfish-like sepals and ultimately to the large, red-skinned berry recognizable as a pomegranate. Under its thick skin lies hundreds, sometimes thousands, of seeds embedded into the plant tissue, each one surrounded by a moist, edible pulp that can be liquefied into a juice or ingested alongside the seed itself. With juice dense in phytonutrients and vitamins, as well as the high-fiber seeds and a polyphenol-rich peel, the pomegranate has become an unofficial poster child for superfoods, a status that is currently being put to the test by the National Institute of Health, through dozens of different clinical trials—none of which involve the benefits of pomegranate martinis.

Photos: Aurora Photos/Dave Shafer, (Opposite) iStock/Aventureco.



SPIRULINA

One of Earth's primary life forms, this edible microalgae is an essential building block of the greater food chain, naturally blooming in highly alkaline lakes and ponds throughout the tropics and subtropics. A type of cyanobacteria (bacteria powered by photosynthesis), spirulina transforms sunlight into an organism rife with chlorophyll, protein, heart-healthy fats, iron, and other nutrients. While today's global demand for spirulina is met through advanced aquaculture in developed countries, the Kanembu people living around Central Africa's Lake Chad still collect and dry this microalgae by hand, as their ancestors did. And in East Africa, flamingos—not humans—have jumped on the spirulina bandwagon. In fact, the diet of Africa's lesser flamingo is comprised principally of these nutrient-packed algae, which enhances the color of its pink feathers. ▷

Photo: iStock/PyryCzech.



KALE

Through selective breeding over thousands of years, the farming of wild cabbage, or *Brassica oleracea*, has spawned a variety of today's most popular healthy vegetables, from broccoli to Brussels sprouts to collard greens to the large, leafy vegetable known as kale. Indeed, all of these illustrious greens are the same species but are considered different cultivars, now farmed across the United States, Europe, and Africa. Kale is further disaggregated by type within its cultivar, with such popular varieties as curly-leaved, plain-leaved, and cavolo nero (aka Tuscan kale or Dino kale, so named for its rough, dinosaur-like texture). The size of a kale plant ranges from 1 foot up to 7, depending on the type. And while each confers its own specific health benefits, in the most general sense all kales provide strong sources of calcium, beta-carotene, and vitamins C and K, as well as the antioxidants lutein and sulforaphane. ♦

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