

## Crunchy, juicy devil's backbone

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The succulent can strengthen bones, while keeping cold and cough at bay



Photo: Harsha R P I remember my mother eagerly waiting for the rainy season to begin and for the tender shoots and fresh leaves of *narale* to sneak out from the trees in our courtyard in a central Karnataka village. *Narale* (*Cissus quadrangularis*) or devil's backbone, as the succulent plant is known, remains dormant the whole year and starts regenerating soon after it receives the first shower of rain in June. Till October, my mother would regularly collect its angular shoots and leaves for making *chutney* and serve it with an advice: the zigzagged stems can fight kidney stones.

I was reminded of her words while working with the Soliga and Lingayat communities in the M M Hills. The Soliga women of Gorasane village would often tell me different recipes and medicinal uses of *narale*. Elderly people in the communities believe *narale chutney* should be consumed at least once a year as it prevents cough and stomach infection and strengthens muscles and bones. They prepare a paste of old *narale* stems and turmeric and use it as a compress to heal fractures and joint pain.

This healing property of *narale* is well established in Ayurveda, where *narale* is referred to as *asthisamharaka*, or bone mender. Clinical studies have also proven its role in repairing tendons and ligaments, relieving joint pain and inflammation, strengthening bones, promoting weight loss and preventing osteoporosis.

My father had discovered another therapeutic property of *narale*. He would boil its old stems along with pepper seeds, garlic, red chilies and a pinch of asafoetida, and grind them into a paste. He would then mix the paste with water in 1:2 ratio and feed the concoction to the cattle to cure leptospirosis disease.

With changing lifestyle, food habit and increasing urbanisation, very few people are aware of *narale*'s health benefits. But the plant is making a comeback because of its ability to survive extremely dry months when other herbs that cure cough and joint pain are hard to come by. It has also become a favourite of terrace gardeners.

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## Narale chutney

### Ingredients

- One bowl of shoots and tender leaves of *narale*
- 4-5 crushed garlic
- 2-3 red chillies
- A pinch of pepper
- 2 medium-sized onions, finely chopped
- A few curry leaves
- 1 teaspoon mustard seeds
- Tamarind to taste
- Salt to taste
- 2 tablespoon oil

### Method

Heat oil in a pan and add pepper. When it starts to crackle, add the shoots and leaves of *narale*. Fry until they turn soft and light brown. Add garlic, onion and red chillies (do not use the entire portion of onion). Fry till golden yellow.

Take out the mixture and grind it into a paste. Again heat oil in a pan. Add mustard seeds, curry leaves and the remaining onion and saute. Pour the paste and stir well. After seasoning add salt and tamarind. Boil for one minute. *Chutney* is ready to be served with rice, ragi balls or roti.

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