FEATURES

THE VERSATILE SOHARHI LEAF

THE FESTIVAL of Diwali is characterised by several activities of religious significance – special prayers, fasting and the lighting of diyas to name a few.

The festival is also characterised by the delicious food enjoyed with friends and family, traditionally served on a large leaf. So have you ever thought about your "miti leaf"? What exactly is this thing you are about to eat off?

It is the leaf of the sohari (Calathea lucida). This relative of the ginger is widespread in areas that are well-watered – often along the banks of streams or abandoned agricultural plots and estates. Indeed, because of its usefulness, it is not uncommon for people to keep a clamp handy in their backyard.

Sohari is a native species, found throughout much of South America. It is a vigorous plant and can easily spread to new areas by its rhizomes. This characteristic makes it an invasive species in other countries where it is not naturally occurring (St Lucia for example).

Of course, while it is referred to as sohari in Trinidad, it is known by different names in other parts of its range including cachiyoc, pondoroo, prayer plant and Cabra/Trinidad banana.

Additionally, some local writers use the alternative spelling of "sharoom".

The leaves of the sohari are long and wide, typically measuring about 1.5 ft wide and 3 ft in length. It is their base – along with their abundance, low cost, makes the sohari a popular food source in Diwali celebrations, Hindu weddings and other occasions.

The flowers are relatively inconspicuous, being small and yellow and borne on brown flower bracts (which themselves might be mistaken for flowers). As for the origin of the practice, a likely explanation is given in the following excerpt from www.trinidadgourmet.com:

"Sohare is a Patois word that means 'food for the gods.' Originally the word sohare was associated with a special kind of root served to Brahmins at religious functions. The small roots were bathed in wine or served on the large leaves found in Trinidad. Soon the leaves adopted the name of the roots. Obviously, the word sohare was incorrect. Today, the word sohare is most commonly associated with the large leaves used as plates at religious functions. Indian food needs space because of the variety of dishes served. This is why a large leaf such as the sohari is preferred to accommodate rice, kachoo, curries, mango, plantain, potato, chron, bhune, chana, and more. Of course, newcomers to the practice of eating on a sohari leaf should be cautioned.

There is a classic Trinidadian joke about an Englishman who attended a traditional Trinidadian wedding. When asked how he enjoyed the meal, he said that the curry was delicious but that the lettuce was rather hard.

But sohari is more than just a "miti leaf" and its usefulness in food preparation and presentation is well known throughout the neotropics.

The underside of a sohari leaf is covered with a thin waxy layer. This provides a degree of waterproofing which makes the leaves useful in the preparation of tamales in parts of South America. This tradition lives on in Trinidad to an extent, as sohari leaves are sometimes used in pastil food production (although banana leaves are evidently preferred).

The leaves are also used to make a traditional Colombian guava jam called toallita. The wax on the leaves’ surface has not gone unnoticed by industry, and there has been some interest in the harvesting and processing of this resource for modern applications (including dentistry). Even without removing it from the plant, the waxy sohari leaves can be used in lining baskets and boxes. Furthermore, fibres stripped from the stems of the leaves are dried and used in basket weaving and handicraft.

The plants themselves are considered ornamental thanks to their fancy leaves and curious flower bracts which thrive their way into the gardens of some international plant collectors.

At the time of writing, a sohari plant near you might be offered for sale on the Internet at shipping prices – a package of 50 seeds of a single plant root (a rhizome) would set you back as much as $10 (in the equivalent currency).

For the student of natural history, sohari has another interesting feature. If you have a clamp of sohari nearby, go take a look at it now. Later this evening, take a look at it again. If you do, you may realize that the leaves have moved! The plant actually responds to changes in light levels; the leaves tend to point upwards and fold upward, ostensibly to reduce exposure to the sun.

So whether you sit down to eat one today or happen to spot one later today or happen to see one in the wilds, hopefully you will now know a little more about this fascinating plant.