

THE MANY USES of UDO

FAMILY: Araliaceae

CHINESE: *Shi Yong Tu Dang Gui*

ENGLISH: Japanese Asparagus, Udo

FRENCH: *Aralie à Feuilles Cordées*

GERMAN: *Japanische Bergangelika*

JAPANESE: *Udo*

Stephen Barstow invites you to savour a remarkable wild edible, Udo



Japanese *Aralia cordata*, Udo (left), with another edible: North American *Allium validum* (right).

A*ralia cordata* or *udo* is grown in many countries and deserves to be much more popular in the West. For what is basically a wild plant, it is remarkably productive, and the highest yielding vegetable that I have grown. It is a herbaceous perennial reaching 3m (9.8ft) tall in the course of the summer months. It is a close relative of ginseng (*Panax ginseng*) and is in fact sometimes used as a substitute for the latter. There are about eight herbaceous *Aralia* species restricted to North America and Asia.

Udo is wild-foraged in Japan, Korea and China but so popular in Japan that it is now cultivated. Author Joy Larkcom stumbled on cultivated plants in a market in Tokyo in the 1990s whilst researching her book, *Oriental Vegetables*, describing them as 60cm (23in) long with white stalks. Behind Larkcom's blanched *udo* stalks lies a very unusual production method. So-called *Nanpaku-udo*, or simply *Tokyo-udo*, is cultivated mainly underground beneath Western Tokyo (Tachikawa and Kokubunji City). The roots are forced during the winter months in naturally warm subterranean caverns excavated in the special Kanto loam, of volcanic origin, which can be excavated without danger of collapse. These caverns were originally used to store vegetables, but have been used for forcing *udo* off-season since about 1927. A pit is first dug 3-4m (9.8-13ft) deep and then several horizontal tunnels are excavated from the bottom of the pit. *Udo* roots are planted in these tunnels and the resultant white stalks are sold locally on markets.

I simply put one of those large black builders' buckets (about 45cm deep) over the roots before the shoots appear in the spring. The temperature is also raised by the bucket, giving an earlier harvest. The bucket is eventually lifted by the plant, a sign that it's time to harvest. Otherwise, you can cultivate *udo* as you would asparagus with perhaps 1.5m (5ft) between plants in a row. In spring you can also earth up the plants as the shoots grow to blanch them.

Nevertheless, many people in Japan prefer the stronger 'better flavoured' green *udo*, often foraged in the wild. There are at least three types recognised: *Yamaudo* (or mountain *udo*), *Miyamaudo* (high-mountain *udo*, actually a different species, *Aralia glabra*) and *Meudo* (the young leafy shoots, similar to *Aralia elata* shoots).

The first time I tried *udo*, I followed a recommendation in the short entry in the *Oxford Companion to Food* (Davidson, 1999). Here it states that *udo* is 'usually simply peeled and steeped in cold water and then eaten almost raw'. Some people find the raw shoots slightly unpleasant and soaking disguises this as does using a dressing. I prepared a Japanese style *aemono* dressing (made from 3tbsp of water, 2tbsp vinegar, 2tbsp soy sauce and sesame



seeds which are best roasted and crushed in a mortar) for the sliced *udo* stem. I have since found that *udo* salad dressings vary widely in Japan and may also contain mustard, garlic, saké, chilli and sugar. *Udo* salad has a crispy texture and is delicious. The flavour of *udo* is mild and is variously said to be lemon-fennel-like or asparagus-like. In Japan, stem slices are also commonly added to soups a minute or so before serving (*Miso-shiru* is a popular soup in Japan in which it is often used). *Udo* stalks are ready to harvest at about the same time (mid to late May) as *Hosta* shoots and could therefore be used as a starter to accompany a *Hosta* meal.

I've also used *udo* in western-style dishes, for example, in a simple green pasta sauce.

Preparation of green *udo* usually involves boiling for a few minutes to reduce the stronger flavour, although different people will tend to like different strengths. It is often served deep-fried in tempura batter, in particular the leafy tops (like *Aralia elata*). The flower bud umbels are also a delicious vegetable available in mid-summer, also used in tempura. The roots are reported to be used, but I think you would only want to try this if you had too many plants.

It is often recommended to soak the *udo* in a water/vinegar mix if you won't be preparing food for a while, both to maintain the colour and keep it from becoming bitter.

The closely related *Aralia continentalis* (syn. *Aralia cordata* ssp. *continentalis*) can be used in a similar way. In Baranov (1967) this species is reported to be used occasionally by the Chinese in Manchuria and it is also used in Korea.

Udo is also cultivated in North America to a limited extent for oriental markets and the UK company NamaYasai, specialising in Japanese vegetables, is growing *udo*. It doesn't travel well and this is therefore a natural slow food that needs to be grown locally!

Udo grows away quite quickly starting from seed, taking perhaps 3-4 years to the first harvest. It is basically a shade-loving plant, so it is ideal for a forest garden, but doesn't mind open sunny conditions provided that the soil doesn't dry out. It is also, luckily for me, considerably hardier than the UK hardiness zone 8 given in the Plants For A Future database (it has been reported to survive Finnish winters below -30°C/-22°F).

Aralia cordata and *A. continentalis* are available from a handful of UK and US based nurseries at present and seed is also sometimes available in Europe. Paul Barney of Edulis in the UK exhibited *udo* at the Chelsea Flower Show in May 2012. A recent ornamental introduction from Japan is the cultivar 'Sun King', with its bright gold leaves which, and I quote '...is truly one of the most amazing new perennial introductions in the last decade'. It is available from 22 nurseries in the UK at the time of writing 🌍

Stephen Barstow has spent over 30 years trialling edible perennials from across the globe. He grows over 2,000 edibles in his garden near the Arctic Circle in Norway, and earned the name 'Extreme Salad Man' in 2003 for a salad of 538 different varieties.

This article is an extract from Stephen Barstow's *Around the World in 80 Plants* available for just £14.96 (RRP £19.95) from: www.green-shopping.co.uk/around-the-world-in-80-plants.html

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Top: The young shoots are preferred by some people and are known as Meudo. Centre: Udo stems, blanched under a bucket. Bottom: Udo salad is easy: just peel, slice and add the dressing!