

The Herb Society of America

Promising Plants Profiles

Basella alba* var. *rubra

syn. *Basella rubra*

Genus: *Basella*

Specific Epithet: *alba*

Varietas (Variety): *rubra*

Common Names: Malabar spinach, Ceylon spinach, climbing/vine spinach

Family: Basellaceae

Flower Color: white, tinged with pink

Form: perennial vine but grown as an annual outside of the tropics

Hardiness Zone: 10

Height: 3-30'

Soil: moist but well-drained, average garden soil

Sun: full sun or partial shade

Uses: culinary, dye, ornamental, medicinal *

Parts Used: whole plant



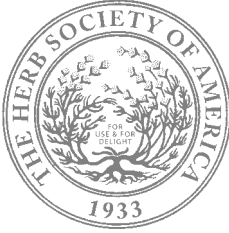
“This easy-to-grow vine native to tropical Asia and Africa is a must for any herb garden. Not only is it beautiful, but very useful as well. A twining vine, *Basella alba* can grow to 9 or 10 feet tall in a growing season provided it has a strong trellis. Otherwise it will scramble over the ground and climb over plants that get in its way. The most beautiful form of *B. alba* is *B. alba* var. *rubra*. The difference with the variety, as opposed to the all-green species, is the striking contrast between the succulent dark green leaves and the bright purple-red stems and petioles that support them. Growth is most vigorous and the colors most vibrant when the plant is grown in full sun, but it will grow fine in a bit of shade. In either situation, Malabar spinach prefers a moist, average garden soil. The flowers, which are small, white, and tinged with pink, form in small clusters on the end of short stems at the nodes. Pea-size, dark purple, juicy fruits follow the flowers, which adds another ornamental dimension.

In warmer climates (zone 7b and higher) the seeds will over-winter, and if they are not thinned, the plant could become a bit weedy. The seedlings are easily pulled. In northern climates, starting plants indoors 4 to 6 weeks before the last frost will give them a jump on the season.

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Photo by James Adams

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Basella alba* var. *rubra (continued)

In the heat of the summer, when all of the garden spinach has turned bitter, Malabar spinach is at its best. The leaves taste remarkably like traditional spinach and can be harvested generously. Use them just like regular spinach, raw or cooked. The fleshy, brightly colored fruit are also useful. The purple juice, obtained from crushed fruit, was used as a dye for stamps to imprint on documents, and as rouge to brighten cheeks. The fruit juice is also used to color food such as jellies and pastries.” – James Adams, Curator of the National Herb Garden, Promising Plants Presentation, 2005

Seed Source: Johnny’s Selected Seeds, Winslow, ME



* **Disclaimer:** Profiles are intended to provide a brief introduction to each herb. For additional information on uses, including medicinal contraindications, see the References list. The Herb Society of America can not advise, recommend, or prescribe herbs for medicinal use. Please consult a health care provider before pursuing any herbal treatments. Inclusion of vendor information does not indicate an endorsement by The Herb Society of America, and HSA can not guarantee availability of seeds/plants.

Photo by James Adams

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