

PHENOMENAL PLANT TO CULINARY ANACHRONISM

SECHIUM EDULE (CHOKO) IN AUSTRALIA

Alison Vincent

S*echium edule*, known in Australia as the choko, is a perennial cucurbitaceous plant, that is, of the same plant family as cucumbers, melons, pumpkins and squashes. It is a strong climber with ovoid fruit, shaped like an elongated pear, which contain a single seed. The surface of the pale green or greenish-yellow fruit is often deeply furrowed and may be covered in prickles (especially as the choko ages), while the flesh is firm, crisp and cream coloured. All parts of the plant are edible from the underground tuber to the leaves and young tendrils. Known by a variety of names, including chuen, christophine, chayote, mirliton, cho cho, and chow chow, *Sechium edule* is widely cultivated in warm climates from Mexico, where it is thought to have originated, through Latin America, the Caribbean, south-east Asia and China, India and Africa. Unknown in Australia before the late 1880s, the choko was once a common sight in suburban gardens, especially those along the eastern seaboard, and made a regular appearance at mealtimes. Today what was once hailed as a phenomenal plant is at best a culinary anachronism.


The *Brisbane Courier* of 14 June 1890 published a paper delivered by Mr Louis Bernays to the Royal Society of Queensland entitled 'The introduction of the "chocho" to Queensland'. Bernays, a founding member of the Queensland Acclimatisation Society, told his audience that in June 1888

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New Commercial Crops

FOR NEW SOUTH WALES.
(BY FRED TURNER, F.R.S., &c.)
CULTIVATION AND USES OF THE
"CHOCHO" OR "CHAYOTE."
(SECHIUM EDULE, SWARZE.)
(See Illustration in this page.)

The first time that I saw the choko or chocho was in Green Garden, Brisbane, where it was first planted for sale as a new vegetable. It was brought to me by Mr. Turner, who had seen it in the States.



FRUIT.
About one-third, between five and six inches long, and two to three inches in diameter. The fruit is ovoid, and has a single seed. The surface is pale green or greenish-yellow, and is often deeply furrowed and may be covered in prickles (especially as the choko ages), while the flesh is firm, crisp and cream coloured.



FOLIAGE AND FLOWERS.
The plant is a perennial climber with large, heart-shaped leaves and long, trailing tendrils. The flowers are small and tubular, and are borne in clusters from the leaf axils.

TO KEEP CHOCHO NEAR.
The choko is a perennial plant, and will grow for several years. It is a strong climber, and will grow on a trellis or support. The fruit is ovoid, and has a single seed. The surface is pale green or greenish-yellow, and is often deeply furrowed and may be covered in prickles (especially as the choko ages), while the flesh is firm, crisp and cream coloured.

SEEDS.
The seeds are small and round, and are contained in a single seed. They are pale green or greenish-yellow, and are often deeply furrowed and may be covered in prickles (especially as the choko ages), while the flesh is firm, crisp and cream coloured.

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Fred Turner, *New Commercial Crops*,
Australian Town and Country Journal, 30 June 1894.