

Pigeon Pea Nutritional Benefits

Why is it Important?

Many Afghan farmers know pigeon pea (*harhar* in Pashto) is an excellent cover crop, green manure, wind break, and living fence. However, most are unaware that pigeon pea is also an outstanding nutritional source for humans as well as livestock. Pigeon pea grows quickly and tolerates unfavorable conditions, including poor soil quality and drought. Additionally, it can be dried easily and stores very well when dried. These characteristics make pigeon pea a great option for increasing family nutritional security and maintaining livestock health, particularly during the lean months between harvests.

Human Nutrition

Pigeon pea is a good source of protein, dietary fiber, and various vitamins: thiamin, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, copper, and manganese. 100g of mature raw pigeon peas also provide 114% (76% for pregnant women) of the daily requirement of folate. The typical Afghan diet is highly folate deficient, which is a factor linked to anemia, major birth defects, and higher incidents of heart disease and stroke.

Pigeon pea is also low in saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium. This makes pigeon pea—like other legumes—a healthy substitution for meats. In combination with grains, pigeon peas constitute a well-balanced human diet.

Pigeon peas may be sprouted by keeping them damp—either in a bowl of water or a wet towel—for one to several days. Sprouting increases the digestibility of pigeon peas and changes the flavor. Pigeon peas may also be ground into flour. Immature pigeon peas are edible, but generally have less nutritional value than mature peas.

Livestock Nutrition

Pigeon pea is excellent livestock forage, and the leaves' flavor becomes more palatable to livestock as the plant ages. Avoid heavy or frequent foraging to prevent damage to the plant. Livestock may also consume milled raw pigeon peas. Seedpod hulls and harvested plant waste are a nutritious feed for sheep.

Pigeon Pea versus Sunn Hemp

Sunn hemp is relatively new to Afghanistan, and, like pigeon pea, is known by farmers as a good cover crop, green manure, wind break, and living fence. As such, farmers often do not differentiate between the two, and also refer to sunn hemp as *harhar*. Unlike pigeon pea, however, sunn hemp is not a common source of human or animal nutrition. The exceptions are goats and camels, which are undeterred by sunn hemp's bitter flavor. Sunn hemp is, however, a good source of oil, although this is not commonly recognized by Afghan farmers.



Clockwise from top left: raw pigeon pea; pigeon pea plant; mature pigeon pea; cooked pigeon pea.