



Introducing *Ashitaba*


The *Angelica keiskei* plant, native to the Izu Islands off the coast of Japan and now also cultivated in Indonesia, is commonly known as *ashitaba*—a term generally applied to the plant itself, its fresh leaves and the powders derived from the plant's leaves and sap by companies like Japan Bio Science Laboratory (JBSL). The Japanese eat the leaves raw or cooked, make *ashitaba* tea by pressing the leaves, sprinkle finely ground *ashitaba* powder over a variety of foods, like yogurt, and include the powder as a healthy, functional ingredient in products like baked goods and noodles.

“The name *ashitaba* means ‘tomorrow’s leaf,’” says Vincent Hackel, president and CEO. “*Ashita* means ‘tomorrow’ and *ba* means ‘leaf.’” The name stems from the plant’s ability to quickly regenerate new leaves after taking cuttings.

Originally, the Japanese treated *ashitaba* leaves like other greens, such as kale, eating them raw or cooking them in various dishes. “Then they started looking at its nutritional profile,” says Hackel, and found that it was quite high in a number of important nutrients. That’s when they started making *ashitaba* powders. *Ashitaba* contains, per 100 grams of raw leaf: 65.0 mg calcium, 5.3 grams fiber, 1.0 mg iron, 3,700 µg beta-carotene, 2,100 µg vitamin A, 0.1 mg vitamin B₁, 0.24 mg vitamin B₂ and 55 mg vitamin C. Research has demonstrated a range of health benefits associated with *ashitaba* intake, including visceral fat reduction, improved fat metabolism, improved glucose tolerance, lower blood pressure, improved circulation, higher high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol levels, lower triglyceride levels and decreased inflammation, among others.

Many of these health benefits have been attributed to the compounds known as chalcones in *ashitaba*. Several different chalcones are present in *ashitaba*—at least 10, notes Hackel. Therefore, JBSL has also developed an ingredient with a highly concentrated level of *ashitaba* chalcones. “These are very unique polyphenols that are found in the leaf, but are bountiful in the bright-yellow sap of the plant,” he says. “We collect the sap and concentrate it to a standardized ratio of two of the chalcones, and then make that powder available as a nutritional-supplement ingredient, as well.”

The whole-leaf *ashitaba* powder has a pleasant, green, vegetative, mild flavor with a touch of sweetness—and it’s 100% powdered *ashitaba* leaf, nothing is added. “You could just pick up a leaf off the ground and pop it into your mouth, and it tastes good,” says Hackel. However, the chalcone powder (30% *ashitaba* sap and 70% branched cyclodextrin) is quite bitter and requires judicious use of flavors and masking agents.

JBSL intends to pursue FDA GRAS approval for the ingredients in the near future and is currently in the process of USDA organic certification. The ingredients are currently certified-organic in Japan. 

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