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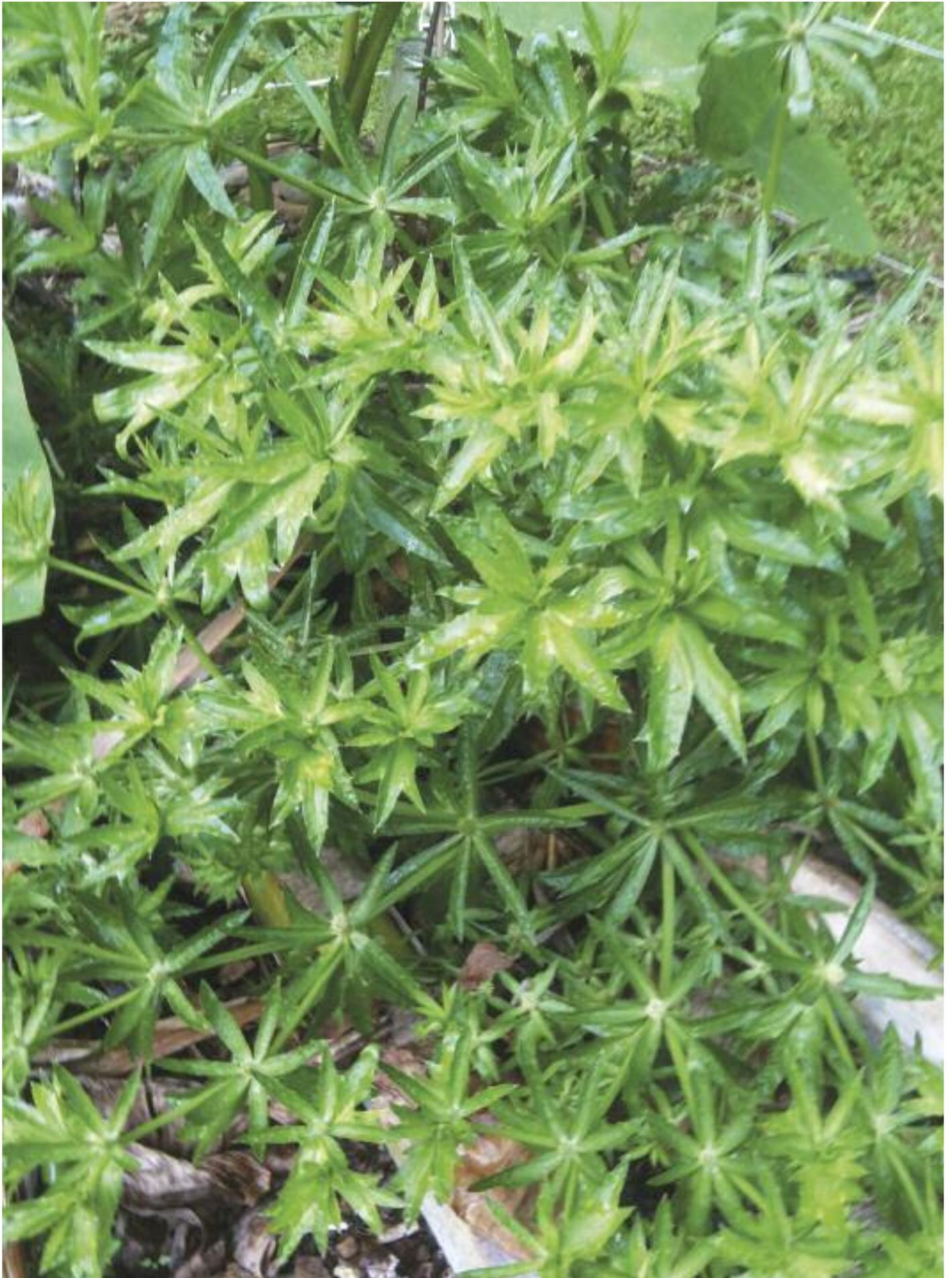
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Recao

Reclaiming the little plant that could

BY SOPHIA SCHWEITZER



Last December, in the courtyard of a plantation building in North Kohala dating back to 1899, I received a box of delicate mochi, full of subtle flavors. A piece of mochi infused with green tea begged to be sampled. But just then its generous donor, Tim Young, thought of another green food, a bolder, brighter thing.

“You have to see it: It isn’t like anything we know,” he said. “We have been growing it in an old house gutter in our yard. Some call it Puerto Rican parsley, we heard.”

Young was referring to *Eryngium foetidum*, a member of the parsley family. And the setting in which he introduced me to the plant was perfect: *Eryngium foetidum* traces its arrival in Hawai‘i back to sugar days, when Asian immigrant workers brought with them their culinary specialties and flavorings: Mochi. Green tea. Herbs.

A descendant of sugar immigrants himself, Young works in the local financial industry, but he has long been fascinated by Hawai‘i’s cultural foods. “We got our plant at the Saturday Farmers’ Market downtown,” he said. “The lady’s always there. A friend of ours grows lots of it, in pots.”

Turns out, this spiny, somewhat unwieldy herb also shows up in Chinatown in Honolulu, and in plant racks in front of Hawai‘i’s small-town hardware stores. Once you look for it, you can’t miss it. Its serrated, elongated and seemingly tough leaves arrange themselves in a rosette around a short, thick stem. Its tall flower stalk crowns into a feathery umbrella of tiny inconspicuous white-green flowers. Farmers may call it recao, or fit weed, ngò gai, or saw-tooth coriander. Or they may just shrug at your ignorance.

In flavor, kinship, spelling and application eerily identical to cilantro, somewhere in its global travels the plant also acquired the name culantro. “You would be surprised how many of us still grow it,” says Florence Santiago, who was born in Lā`ie, O`ahu, to immigrant parents of Puerto Rican and Spanish descent. “It’s so useful. You can add the leaves to stews and soups, anything.”

Commonly used throughout the West Indies, Latin and Central America, West Africa and many Asian countries, recao remains an unsung culinary hero for Westerners. Chances are, though, you have savored it. When you ate pho in your favorite little Vietnamese hole-in-the-wall, for example: The scattered leafy flecks amid your mung bean sprouts, that sudden taste of pungent bitterness, sweet grass, summer days and a pleasantly fleeting sensation of crushed bugs. Used in small quantities, recao serves as an essential seasoning in numerous ethnic dishes, salsas and chutneys.

In Puerto Rican cuisine the herb is indispensable. Chalk it up to *sofrito*, an all-purpose sauce that elevates any great Puerto Rican meal. Traditionally it consists of garlic, onions, green peppers, perhaps tomatoes and, yes, lots of culantro, simmered in achiote (annatto) oil. “I first learned to make sofrito when I was about 13,” says Santiago. “Later, I added my own techniques and ingredients. From generation to generation, you learn, and then you master your own recipe.”

Nutritionally, recao is said to be rich in calcium, iron, carotene and riboflavin. Santiago and other cooks usually only use the leaves. Medicinally, the plant has also long served as an ethnobotanical anti-inflammatory and analgesic. So much so that a study of the leaves was done in 2010 in Trinidad and Tobago: Phytochemicals were found that may one day lead to invaluable new modern medicine. That same year, the Herb Society of America proudly recognized *Eryngium foetidum* as the country’s “Promising Plant of the Year.”

So reclaim a spot for recao. When a recipe asks for cilantro, try recao instead. Use tender leaves, and chop them fine. The sharp, serrated edges soften as soon as the leaves have a chance to wilt. “Try it out,” Santiago says. “Sprinkle a spoonful of finely chopped leaves in an omelet, to begin. It’s great!” ✨

Sofrito

Sofrito knows as many variations as there are Puerto Rican families. And each recipe is secret. You can make a basic sofrito either by blending the key ingredients, then using the sauce uncooked, or by simmering the ingredients, chopped. The following recipe is intended only to get your own creative juices flowing.

- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 medium green bell pepper, seeded and chopped
- ½ red bell pepper, seeded and chopped
- ½ yellow bell pepper, seeded and chopped
- 1 medium onion, peeled and chopped
- 6 cloves garlic, peeled and minced
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- ½ cup culantro leaves, chopped

Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add peppers, onion and garlic. Simmer until they soften. Add the salt, pepper and cumin, and stir to mix well. Stir and cook another 10 minutes to blend the flavors. Add culantro. Stir. Allow it to fully wilt, about 1 minute. Turn off heat. Allow to cool. Store in an airtight glass container. It’ll keep for several days. It also freezes well for up to 2 months.

