Basella alba L.  
(Malabar Spinach) 
(Basella cordifolia, Basella rubra var. alba)

- This species, also known as Espinaca de Malabar, Indian Spinach, Malabar Nightshade, or Vine Spinach, and the closely related Basella rubra L., Ceylon Spinach, are commonly grown food crops for their leaves in tropical countries; they are members of the family Basellaceae Raf., the Madeira Vine Family, which is closely related to the Portulacaceae, Cactaceae, and other fleshy families; these glabrous short-lived tropical perennial vines are grown as annuals in our regions where they reach lengths of 20’ or so; while normally a component of the vegetable garden, the clean lustrous foliage and unusual fleshy twining vines may also serve as a seasonal accent in ornamental landscapes where a quick cover is needed as a temporary groundcover or perhaps on small fences or trellises with a bit of initial assistance; Basella alba is an attractive vine with dual purpose potential.

- Stems, leaves and flower structures are thickish and fleshy in texture; the thick cordate to broadly ovate leaves are impressed above lending them an almost quilted appearance and the upper surface is a rich lustrous dark green; flowers occur as stoutish spikes of greenish white, white, to pink elongated globular fleshy flowers that mature to four-parted purplish black berries; growth is rapid, almost rampant in hot weather; both species thrive in the heat of summer; although perennial in the tropics, USDA hardiness zones 10 to 13, they return weakly where soils cool in winter as under these conditions plants are susceptible to botrytis infection, chilling injury, or cold damage; both taxa can be grown as annuals from either seed or cuttings.

- Basella rubra has more handsome reddish stems and flushing of red on the leaves and fruit, but is otherwise similar to B. alba; some authorities consider these two taxa to be varieties of a single species and are more or less interchangeable in the landscape.

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