



## **Jim May** **Discovering Stevia**

Shortly after Jim May left his position as an end-stage renal disease executive in 1982, he was introduced to the naturally sweet leaves of the stevia plant by a Peace Corps volunteer who had been serving in Paraguay. Although May was initially dubious of the numerous assertions made by the volunteer regarding the remarkable qualities of the South American plant, he was finally persuaded to taste one of the leaves. The sweet, delicate flavor pleasantly surprised him and he immediately became more interested in listening to what the volunteer had to say.

The Peace Corps worker presented May with some research on stevia, including the fact that high-quality unprocessed stevia leaves can be 30 times sweeter than sugar. When processed, the sweetest parts of the plant, called glycosides, are extracted from the leaves and isolated. The combination of these compounds is 300 times sweeter than sugar and contains *no calories*. He also learned the Guarani tribes had consumed the plant for centuries and stood as testament to its safety. They called the plant *Ka'a He'e*, which means "sweet herb." The Guarani added it to yerba maté tea and used it for medicinal purposes to heal a variety of ailments, both internally and topically.

May quickly comprehended the possibilities and immediately invested nearly all of his – and his wife's – life savings to manufacture and market stevia leaf products and stevia extracts. Making his first trip to Paraguay a few weeks later, he wanted to learn everything he could about the native South American plant with the incredibly sweet leaves that had so impressed him.

May had always been personally and professionally keen on issues of health, but it was the extraordinary sweet taste of the stevia leaf that convinced him to change the direction of his life to fully explore this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. May focused on product integrity and, in order to achieve that goal, he had to ensure a steady supply of premium stevia for his products. May met directly with Paraguayan farmers and encouraged them to grow stevia that he would in turn buy. Providing the farmers with an incentive to grow crops for legal commerce has, over the years, helped undermine the narcotics economy that has plagued the region for decades. The synergy resonated strongly with May.

The story of the plant and how indigenous people used it greatly interested May,



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not only for the romance, but also for the health and healing applications as well. Stevia leaves contain 100 important nutrients that are vital to the function and well-being of the human body.

“Today’s wise consumers are looking for a high quality tabletop sweetener that has low calories and low carbohydrates to replace artificial sweeteners, while food and beverage producers are looking for a high intensity sweetener to replace aspartame, sucralose and high fructose corn syrup,” states May.

May is convinced that stevia is the answer to the quest of both producers and consumers but states that improvements in processing must be achieved before stevia achieves its true destiny as the sweetener of choice. He also points out other stevia producers tend to focus strictly on chemically-produced rebaudioside A, rather than natural rebaudioside A, which, when produced within the leaves, is the sweetest of the glycosides. He views this as shortsighted and one of the differences between his sweetener, SweetLeaf Stevia<sup>®</sup> and those of his competitors.

He is opposed to using chemicals in the extraction process, since history has shown that artificial ingredients usually prove problematic for a number of reasons, including producing an odd aftertaste and potential adverse health effects. He states that a blend of specific glycosides produced within the leaves produces a superior-tasting sweetener.

May extends his commitment to the production of a quality product to include the environment. He is proud his company, Wisdom Natural Brands<sup>™</sup>, developed sustainable farming processes early on and continues to practice them. Because his company uses no chemicals, solvents or alcohols in their extraction or purification process, there is no waste whatsoever. The leaf residue becomes cattle feed or ground mulch, and the spent water is distributed to local farmers to irrigate their fields.