I never knew you could wash your hair with fresh fruit, but that’s exactly what my parents did when they survived the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. They had never seen a bottle of shampoo. They didn’t have the resources for such luxuries. Actually, there weren’t any luxuries at all. Even food was scarce.

Although it was dangerous, they sometimes were able to pick fruit, including ripe palm fruits. Obviously, they ate the palm fruit, because they were starving. But if they had enough, they also experimented with using it to wash their hair. They used trial and error to find products to wash with. For example, they tried washing with the ash left over from cooking, but it didn’t clean their hair too well.

One day when they were at the lake during their limited break time, they tried washing their hair with palm fruit. They grabbed a ripe palm fruit and peeled its skin. They took the inside of the fruit and massaged it onto their wet hair and scalp. Then they combed their hair and rinsed off the jelly-like, pulpy bits of fruit with water from the lake. And voila! They had clean and healthy hair.

When they were telling me about this process, I asked them if they worried about being killed because the Khmer Rouge killed people for any reason at all. Maybe washing your hair in the lake could be dangerous. My parents answered that in their region, they felt that they could wash their hair safely.

When I asked about the benefits of using palm fruits as a shampoo, my parents explained that ripe palm fruits are very good for hair, because they are natural. There are no added substances or chemicals. That means, as long as they felt safe, they could use it to wash their hair as often as they wanted.
Interestingly, I did some research online and found that palm fruits have vitamin E and carotene in them. Vitamin E helps strengthen hair by supporting cell growth, while carotene helps reduce gray hair and hair loss.

These are surprising benefits of palm fruits on hair and I started to understand why people in my parents’ generation in Cambodia used palm fruit to wash their hair. I think people in the past were very smart and creative in using natural resources to support their lives, not only as food, but also to take care of their hair. Without technology or a laboratory, they found a very intelligent way to wash their hair even in a very bad situation like in the Khmer Rouge regime.

Using palm fruits as shampoo is a wonderful thing I have learned from my parents. I hope to try this sometime when I am visiting my country.

**Background on Cambodia**

**From 1974-1979,** Cambodia was ruled by the oppressive Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge wanted Cambodia to be completely self-sufficient. When they got control of the country, they forced people out of cities and into the country to work on farms. Many people were killed, imprisoned, and tortured. Many died from exhaustion due to long forced marches and over-work. Others died from diseases that could have been treated with medicine if the Khmer Rouge allowed imports, which they did not. Approximately 2 million people died during the Khmer Rouge rule. This represented 21% of the population. Many Cambodian refugees are in the U.S. because they fled the Khmer Rouge.

**Find out more** about Cambodia. What European country colonized it in the 1800s? What was the role of the U.S. in Cambodia during the Vietnam War?

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