

Giant Swamp Taro and the Reawakened 25

GIANT SWAMP TARO IS A WIDELY CULTIVATED TUBER IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS. Its tasty corm can reach an impressive weight of 200 pounds, with 40 inches of diameter. Labeled for years as poor food and abandoned for better-paying crops, giant swamp taro is becoming more important to Pacific islanders since it is one of the few food crops that can survive on lands where the sea level rises. This crop requires little to no attention to be cultivated and can represent a great resource for villagers' incomes. Thanks to the work of social entrepreneurs and researchers in the Fiji Islands, women farmers could combine their traditional knowledge with new skills to market giant swamp taro based products and increase the food security of their communities.



GIANT SWAMP TARO

Cyrtosperma Merkusii

Origin: Indonesia
Grown in Micronesia, the Pacific atoll islands, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea
A highly nutritious tuber which grows on marginal land

Giant swamp taro is a widely cultivated tuber in the Pacific Islands. It's tasty corm can reach an impressive weight of 200 pounds and 40 inches in diameter. Labeled for years as food of the poor and abandoned for better paying crops, giant swamp taro is becoming more important to Pacific islanders since it is one of the few food crops that can survive on lands where the sea level is rising. This crop requires little to no attention to be cultivated and can represent a great resource for villagers' incomes. Thanks to the work of social entrepreneurs and researchers on the islands of Fiji, women farmers are combining their traditional knowledge with new skills to market giant swamp taro value added products and increase the food security of their communities.

BOTANY

The Giant Swamp Taro is a herbaceous perennial that grows a nutrient-rich corm. It is believed to be the largest edible corm-producing plant in the world (ref). Typically, the stem grows with six to eight large arrow-shaped leaves, ranging from 1-2 meters long and wide. Mature plants are 3-4 meters tall with inflorescence that have a long thick, yellow spathe and a purple spadix, variation of colours exist within varieties. However, the seeds tend to not be fertile, thus cultivation is largely from cuttings of suckers. As the stem thickens at the base, a large corm forms underground. Corms of the giant swamp taro vary in size, from 15-25 kilograms on average (although some grow up to 90 kilograms), and shape, from cylindrical to conical (NDZL).

CULINARY USE

Leaves are used for wrapping food for cooking underground, for covering the underground ovens, serving cooked food, or for storage (UHI). The taro corm can be ground into flour and used as a substitute for glutinous rice. It can also be roasted, grated, or baked whole (IJERD). In addition, the corms can be peeled and boiled; peeled and cooked with coconut milk; roasted or steamed; or peeled, scalded, chopped, dried, and stored for a few months (Plucknett).

NUTRITION AND MEDICINAL USE

Giant swamp taro corms are rich in β -carotene and essential minerals: calcium, potassium, iron, and zinc. In addition, it is high in fiber. As it is part of a typical diet in areas where giant swamp taro can grow to include high amounts of starch, this would be an excellent nutrient-rich substitute. It also provides variability in ways to cook it and it can be served to infants and people with dental problems as a puree (Engleberger et al.).

AGRICULTURE

It usually takes 2 years on average before a corm can be harvested. Certain varieties can be harvested as early as 6 months while other varieties tend to take longer to develop large corms and can be in the ground for 6 or more years. Giant swamp taro is planted using cuttings of the budding suckers. It can be planted year-round, given the right growing conditions (Plucknett). It grows best in swampy conditions and can tolerate occasional drought and high winds (UHI). The best growing conditions are in natural swampland, with rich hummus, and slow running water. For example, just inland of mangrove swamps (NZDL). The corms are harvested by hand and are usually eaten right away, although they can be stored underground for up to six months (NZDL).

HISTORY

Giant swamp taro dates back to prehistoric times. Subfossil leaf fragments of giant swamp taro dating back to as early as 1451 were discovered on Henderson Island, a Pitcairn group of raised limestone at the extreme margin of southeastern Polynesia and the Indo-West Pacific region (UHI). On atoll islands, the cultivation of many crops is limited due to the sandy, salty conditions, but giant swamp taro does well in these areas. It has more recently been shown to be a significantly valuable source of food security (Engleberger et al.).

RESEARCH

Giant swamp taro has been studied because of its potential to provide an indigenous source of nutrients for food scarce communities in Micronesia and other Pacific islands. Research shows it was prehistorically grown in conditions where other crops cannot grow, and therefore has the potential to become of considerable importance in modern agrarian societies in islands such as Polynesia and Micronesia (UHI). Though indigenous and easy to cultivate in the Indo-Pacific region, giant swamp taro has been increasingly replaced with imported and nutritionally poor Western staples. In addition, climate change is threatening the potential cultivation of this taro because of increasing water salinity in fresh groundwater due to sea-level rise (Rao et al.).

CUISINE

- [Giant Swamp Taro Banana bread](#)
- [Harvesting and cooking](#)

SOURCING

- [Swamp Taro, Rarepalmseeds.com](#)
- [Tropical Plant Encyclopedia](#)

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

- [Giant Swamp Taro: plant for the future?](#)
- [Pacific Pests, Pathogens & Weeds](#)

SOURCES

- [NZDL](#)
- [UHI](#)
- [Rao et al.](#)
- [Plucknett](#)
- [IJERD](#)
- [Engleberger et al.](#)

