

3/20/2008 Taro: the potato of the humid tropics - TROPICAL DOME

Hungry people have searched for food crops throughout the world. Some plants produce seeds or fruits to attract gatherers, but others have their treasures below ground. One example is taro. It produces corms which are starchy, underground stems. At first, people might have spit them out as inedible because the cells are filled with needle-like crystals of calcium oxalate. These crystals probably deter herbivores from nibbling on the leaves. People eventually figured out that cooking or mashing the corms and washing the paste made it palatable. It is famous in Hawaii as the main ingredient of poi. Taro is a daily staple for about 100 million people in Africa, Asia, and many island countries.

Taro may have originated in Malaysia. Perhaps early farmers discovered that they could cut off the top of the corms and replant them and then eat what was left. Notice the new shoot sprouting from a corm in the photo (Credit: Asit K. Ghosh, Atlas of Florida Plants, <http://www.plantatlas.usf.edu/>). The plants rarely flower which is considered evidence that the plant has been cultivated for a long time and now depends on humans to spread it. The prolific crop spread throughout warm tropical areas. Maoris and Polynesians carried it to distant islands in their canoes.

In the other photo are the "elephant ear" leaves which can be several feet long (Credit: Cal Lemke, University of Oklahoma). Taro is sometimes grown as an ornamental and is available in a wide variety of leaf colors from green to dark purple. The scientific name for taro is *Colocasia esculentum* from the Greek word for taro (Kolocasia) and the Latin word for edible (esculentum). Taro belongs to the arum family. The "flower" is actually many flowers (an inflorescence) with an upright, hood-like spathe that surrounds the spadix, a spike of tiny flowers. Others in this family include caladium, philodendron, calla lilies, and skunk cabbage.

Taro chips are a tasty alternative to potato chips. They are light colored with purplish veins and available from the Terra snack brand in local stores. To celebrate this important tropical crop, there is a taro festival in East Maui, Hawaii each year (<http://www.tarofestival.org/>). With global warming, the tropics have expanded about 300 miles north and south in recent years, so we may have a similar celebration on the mainland in the future.

