

The East London Garden Society

Plant Facts

Taro



Dubbed as the potato's hairy and unfortunate-looking cousin, Taro (*Colocasia Esculenta*) is a culinary favourite in many cultures around world.

In Hawaii, it has transformed into Poi, a traditional dish of mashed Taro roots and water, and served to guests or fed to babies.

Despite its odd and unappetizing appearance, there's more to Taro than meets the eye.

Here's everything you need to know about Taro:

- Large and herbaceous, Taro is a perennial from the Araceae (aroid) family that can be identified by its frilly, heart-shaped leaves that grow at the end of long and stout petioles, resembling an elephant's ear. The Taro plant can grow anywhere, reaching five to six feet tall. It also has other names, such as dasheen, Chinese potato, cocoyam, curcas and dalo.
- Taro is native to India and Southeast Asia and has earned the name 'the potato of the tropics'. It grows best in warm humid climates, thriving in marshy locations with wet soils, is an extremely hardy plant and is one of the few crops that can grow in flooded regions.
- The starchy, underground-growing corm, known as the Taro root, is a staple food in the above areas, as well as in China, Hawaii, Africa and the Caribbean. The Taro root is usually the size of a turnip but oblong-shaped, with a brown and fibrous skin. The surface has circular rings that indicate where it has been attached to the scaly leaves.
- When cut, the flesh of the Taro root is a white/cream colour in most varieties. Swamp Taro, Giant Taro and Arrow Leaf Elephant's Ear are some of the most common varieties of this plant. Although it's prepared in the same way as potatoes, Taro root, which softens once cooked, has a more delicious and nuttier flavour than the former. Its flavour is so well-liked that Taro has been incorporated in countless dishes, from main entrees to desserts.
- Although the root is the most popularly used part of the plant, the large leaves are edible, but both the root and the leaves should always be cooked, as they are both toxic when raw.

- The benefits of Taro root come from its rich source of nutrients, which include magnesium, iron, fibre, potassium, manganese, zinc, copper and phosphorus. It contains good amounts of antioxidants, as well as vitamins A, B6, C and E.
- The quality of this root crop that stands out the most, is its high fibre content, which is said to be three times higher than that of a white potato. Fibre is essential to digestive health, and helps prevent constipation, bloating, cramping and indigestion.

Due to its outstanding nutrient profile, it's no surprise that Taro, through its root and leaves, offers health-promoting benefits, such as:

- Reducing the risk of diabetes - the dietary fibre in Taro can help regulate insulin and glucose levels in your body, preventing your blood sugar from spiking.
- Improving vision - antioxidants cryptoxanthin and beta-carotene in Taro help keep free radicals at bay, reducing your risk of macular degeneration and cataracts.
- Helping to keep skin healthy - vitamins A and E are vital to skin health. Adding Taro to your diet may help reduce blemishes and wrinkles and give your complexion a healthy glow.
- Bolstering your immunity - the high vitamin C levels in Taro helps stimulate your immune system to produce more white blood cells, which can defend your body from pathogenic organisms.
- Providing a healthy heart - aside from its dietary fibre, the potassium in Taro is essential for maintaining your cardiovascular function. It helps control your heartbeat, relieves stress on the arteries and keeps blood pressure in check.

When buying Taro, always look for fresh and firm roots that feel heavy for their size. Avoid corms with cracks, soft spots or sprouts at the scale. Always store them in a cool, dark and a well-ventilated area. The roots do not require refrigerating, but the greens will, so place them in the crisp section, as you would do for other leafy greens. Before cooking the root, simply wash it, trim the ends and peel away the tough skin using a paring knife. Remove the sticky sap by submerging it in cold water.