

South Pacific Commission

Community
Health Services



South
Pacific
Foods

Leaflet **13**
1990

Sweet Potato

A store of goodness

Think of a plant that has a high food value, is easily grown, matures quickly, produces a lot of food for the planting space used, has good keeping qualities, and tastes nice. It sounds too good to be true. Yet the sweet potato has all of these qualities.

Planting a large crop of sweet potatoes guarantees that there will be no food shortages in case of disasters such as cyclones or flood. After a disaster, the crop can still be harvested, to be eaten or stored. Some of the tips can be replanted to produce another crop quickly. The young leaves and tips of the sweet potato are always a good food, emergency or not.

Sweet potatoes are a very nutritious local food that should be used to their full potential.



Easy to grow

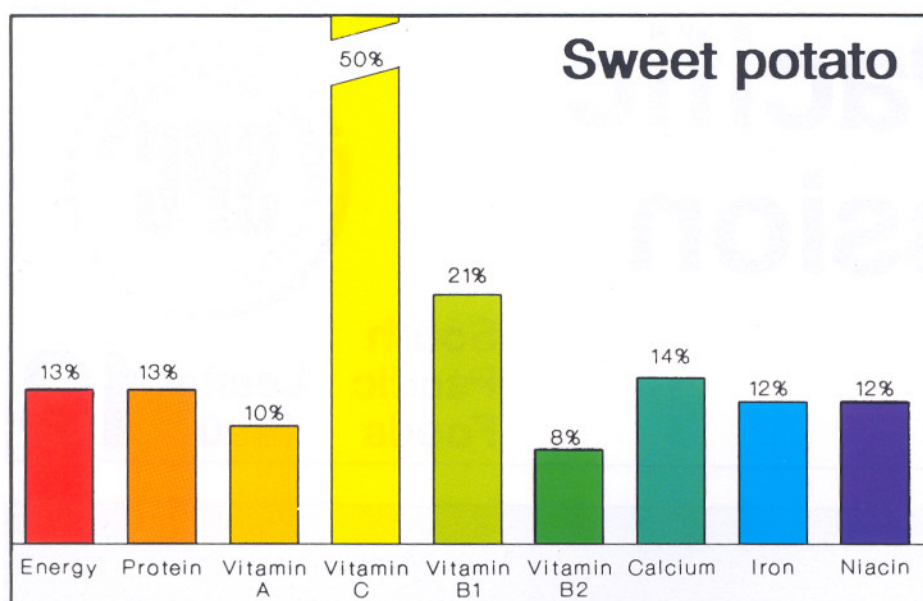
The scientific name of sweet potato is *Ipomoea batatas*. The stems are long and trailing, with deep green leaves. The flowers are funnel-shaped and white or pink. The roots may have a light yellow to purple skin and the flesh inside may be white, pink, purple or yellow.

There are hundreds of varieties of sweet potato. Choose a plant that has good qualities and is disease-free to use as planting material.

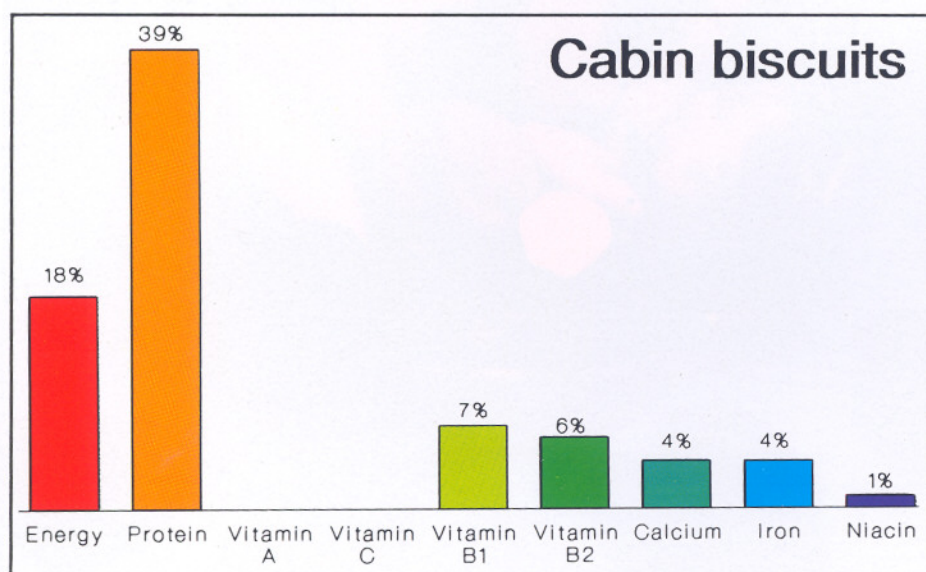
Sweet potatoes are normally grown during the drier months. Stem

cuttings about 46 centimetres (18 inches) long are generally used for planting. Pieces of the roots may also be used. The planting hole should be 15–30 centimetres (6–12 inches) deep. After planting, make a mound around the cutting for the tubers to grow. Make sure that the sweet potatoes are not under shade.

The roots are harvested 3–7 months after planting, when the leaves turn yellow. For more information on growing sweet potatoes, contact your local agricultural officer.



Percentage of daily needs of an adult woman filled by 1 cup sweet potato (raw)



Percentage of daily needs of an adult woman filled by 4 biscuits

Good food for everyone

The roots of the sweet potato are a good source of **energy**, which the body needs to stay active and alive. Yellow and orange varieties of the sweet potato root contain a high amount of **Vitamin A**. Other pale-fleshed varieties contain much less of this important vitamin.

The bar graphs show that sweet potato roots contain a wider variety of nutrients than Pacific cabin biscuits. Even after cooking, the roots contain many vitamins and minerals, particularly **Vitamin C** which cabin biscuit lacks.

Mashed sweet potato, with a very small amount of coconut cream added, makes a good weaning food for babies. Using sweet potatoes from the garden to prepare baby food means not having to buy expensive baby foods from the store. Babies will enjoy eating a large variety of local foods.

Green leaves for health

Sweet potato tips are a health-giving, protective food. They are excellent sources of **Vitamin A** and **Vitamin C**. Vitamin A is needed for proper growth, healthy eyes, and prevention of disease. Vitamin C

keeps the body tissues strong, helps the body use iron, and assists chemical actions in the body.

Vitamin B2 (riboflavin) is necessary for normal growth and healthy eyes. It is found in fair amounts in the tips.

Eating dark green leaves every day is a good habit. Green leaves give the body the vitamins and minerals it needs. The bar graphs show that sweet potato leaves provide more nutrients, particularly **Vitamin A**, than European cabbage. The darker the leaves, the more **Vitamin A** they contain.

Preparation

The roots

Sweet potatoes which are dry and hard are best cooked by boiling. The soft, sweet, watery kind with a darker colour are best cooked by baking.

Sweet potatoes may be **baked** in an earth oven in their skins, or they may be **boiled** or **steamed**. They may be eaten as they are or mashed with a little coconut cream.

To keep sweet potato roots from changing colour, do not peel the skin before cooking. Cooking sweet potatoes with the skin on helps keep the vitamins. If they are peeled, boil them straight away for about 20 minutes so that they will keep their colour.

Cooked sweet potato can be made into a variety of dishes. Mashed with a little coconut cream, fish, and green vegetables, it makes a good baby food. Leftovers may be cut up into chips and fried in a little oil. They may also be mixed with other foods to make casseroles, cakes, and pies.

Traditionally, when cooked with other foods, the sweet potatoes are peeled, sliced and placed in a banana leaf that has been softened over a fire. Coconut cream, other vegetables and fish are added. The bundle is baked in an earth oven or steamed and makes a complete meal.

The leaves

The young leaves and tips are prepared by boiling for a short time in a small amount of water. Serving or cooking sweet potato leaves with a little fat, such as coconut cream, helps the body use the Vitamin A that is in the leaves. They may also be fried in a covered pot in a little cooking oil. Onion and garlic may be added for flavour. They are a good addition to soups and are an excellent food for babies, pregnant women, and breast-feeding mothers.

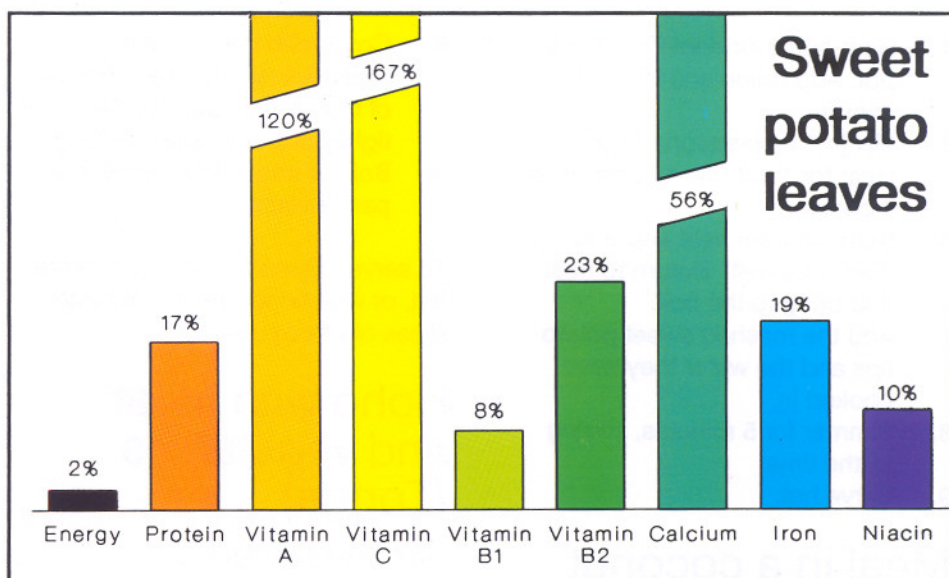
Preservation

Sweet potatoes can be stored for long periods of time if proper care in handling is taken during harvesting. They must also be free from any cuts or bruises.

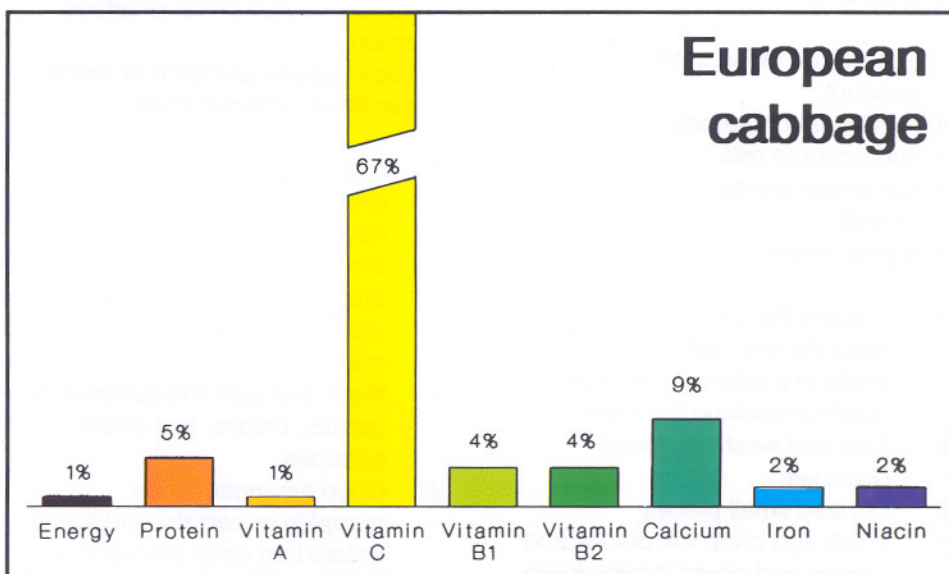
The roots can be washed and dried in the sun for a few days after harvesting, then stored in a dark, cool, dry and airy spot. Stored this way, the roots will keep for several weeks. In some places in the Pacific, sweet potatoes are stored by putting them in ashes.

Drying is another way of preserving sweet potatoes. Use only firm, smooth roots. Steam or boil them with their skin for about 30 to 40 minutes until cooked, but not soft. Peel and cut into thin slices. Dry in the sun or in a solar drier until the slices are extremely leathery. This will take about 3 days. Dried, the sweet potato slices may be stored in air tight containers and later used in soups or stews. They may be pounded into a flour and used along with ordinary flour in baking.

Freezing sweet potatoes also preserves them for later use. Dry them after they are harvested. Wash and cook the roots by boiling, steaming, or baking with the skin left on the root. Cook until they are almost tender. Cool, peel, and slice them. Dip sliced sweet potatoes into a mixture of one part lemon juice to four parts of water to keep them from discolouring. Freeze in airtight containers.



Percentage of daily needs of an adult woman filled by 100 g (about 1 cup) cooked sweet potato leaves and tips



Percentage of daily needs of an adult woman filled by 100 g (about 1 cup) cooked European cabbage

Baby's delight

One serving:

- 3 sweet potato leaves
- 1 small piece pumpkin (approximately 1/2 cup)
- 1 tablespoon fresh or tinned fish
- 1 tablespoon coconut cream
- 1/4 cup water

1. Put all ingredients in a pot.
2. Cook slowly for about 10 minutes until pumpkin is soft.
3. Mash well.
4. Serve warm.

Sweet potato tip soup

Four servings:

- 2 cups sweet potato tips
- 1 cup water
- 3 tablespoons butter or cooking oil
- 1 tablespoon chopped onion
- 3 tablespoons flour
- 3 cups milk

1. Wash sweet potato tips thoroughly in clean fresh water.
2. Cook the sweet potato tips in the water for about 10 minutes until soft.
3. Remove the tips and mash them. Save the cooking water.

- Heat butter or cooking oil in a pot. Add onion and fry for 1 minute.
- Mix in 3 tablespoons flour. Heat for 1 minute, stirring while it cooks.
- Remove from heat and add milk. Mix well. Return to heat and bring to the boil.
- Add the mashed sweet potato tips and the water they were cooked in.
- Simmer for 5 minutes, stirring all the time.
- Serve hot.

Meal in a coconut shell

One serving:

- 1 good-sized clean, mature coconut
- 4 small sweet potatoes
- ¼ cup coconut milk
- ½ cup green leaves
- 1 tomato
- 2 spring onions

- Prepare the coconut milk, and keep the two half-coconut shells in a clean place to be used for cooking the meal.
- Peel and wash the sweet potatoes.
- Cut into small pieces.
- Wash and chop the onions and tomato and green leaves. Keep the green leaves separate.
- Place half of the chopped leaves inside a half-coconut shell.
- Put all the other vegetables inside the shell.
- Pour coconut milk over the vegetables.

- Cover with the rest of the green leaves. Put the other half of the shell on top and tie tightly in place using a string.
- Boil for about 45 minutes in a pan of water.

To serve: Open the shell and serve hot, or when cool, serve cold with slices of pineapple.

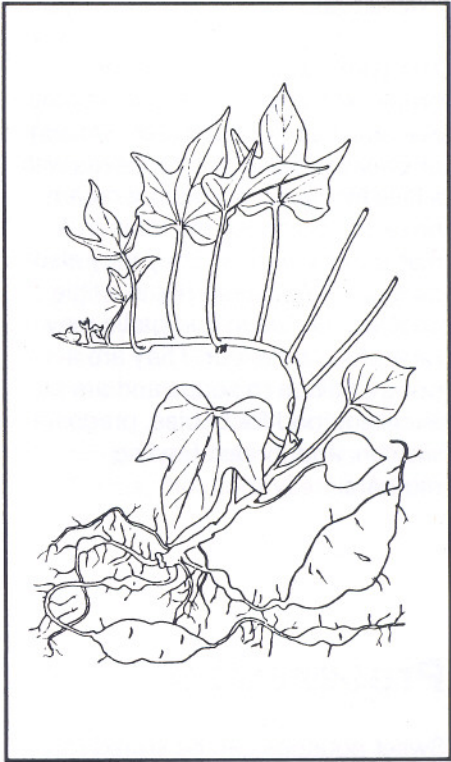
Hoho with meat and vegetables (Tonga)

Four to six servings:

- 6 – 8 taro leaves
- 2 coconuts
- 1 cup water
- 4 cups chopped sweet potatoes
- 1 onion
- 1 cup chopped pumpkin or carrot
- 1 cup fresh or tinned meat

- Clean the taro leaves and arrange on banana leaves that have been softened over the fire.
- Scrape the coconuts, add water and squeeze out the cream.
- Wash and peel the pumpkin or carrots, onions, and sweet potatoes.
- Chop the meat, onion, pumpkin or carrots, and sweet potato into small pieces. Put them on the taro leaves. Pour coconut cream on top.
- Wrap up and bake in an earth oven or steam for about 1 hour.
- Serve hot.

Variations: Use alfoil paper instead of softened banana leaves.



Sweet potato buns

Twelve servings:

- 3 cups sweet potatoes (cooked and mashed)
 - 1 cup milk
 - 2 cups self-raising flour
 - 1 teaspoon lemon juice
- Add milk to the cooked and mashed sweet potatoes in a large bowl.
 - Add the flour a little at a time and mix well. Sprinkle in lemon juice.
 - Mix into a firm dough. Shape into balls the size of an egg.
 - Place on a greased baking tin.
 - Bake in a hot oven (425°F or 220°C) for about 15–25 minutes until done.
 - Cool before serving.

This leaflet is the thirteenth of a series devoted to the uses of local Pacific foods. Other leaflets available in this series are:

- Leaflet 1 – Taro
- Leaflet 2 – Pawpaw
- Leaflet 3 – Mango
- Leaflet 4 – Guava
- Leaflet 5 – Cassava
- Leaflet 6 – Green leaves
- Leaflet 7 – Banana
- Leaflet 8 – Coconut
- Leaflet 9 – Breadfruit
- Leaflet 10 – Pineapple
- Leaflet 11 – Citrus fruits
- Leaflet 12 – Pumpkin
- Leaflet 14 – Yam
- Leaflet 15 – Nuts and seeds
- Leaflet 16 – Legumes
- Leaflet 17 – Fish
- Leaflet 18 – Seafoods

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Yam and vegetable curry

Four servings:

- 4 cups chopped yam
 - 2 tablespoons cooking oil
 - 1 onion, sliced
 - 2 chillies, chopped (optional)
 - 2 teaspoons curry powder
 - 2 cloves garlic, crushed (optional)
 - 2 cups chopped vegetables, e.g. green beans, tomatoes, pumpkin, carrots
 - 1½ cups water
1. Wash and peel the yam. Cut it into pieces.
 2. Heat the oil in a pot. Add sliced onion and chillies (optional) and cook until browned.
 3. Add curry powder and crushed garlic (optional) stirring all the time. Cook for one minute.
 4. Add yam pieces and vegetables, stirring well. Add ½ cup of water. Cover.
 5. Cook slowly for about 15 minutes until the yam is soft. If the yam is still hard, then add 1 cup water and cook for a few more minutes.
 6. Serve hot with fish and fresh dark green salad.

Baked yam and pawpaw savoury

Six servings:

- 4 cups chopped yam
 - 1 cup coconut cream
 - 1 ripe pawpaw
 - 1 onion
 - 1 large soft banana leaf
1. Wash and peel the yam. Cut into thin slices and wash again.
 2. Peel onion and pawpaw. Slice thinly.
 3. Place the yam, pawpaw and onion in layers on a banana leaf that has been softened over a fire, or on alfoil paper. Finish with a layer of pawpaw on top.
 4. Pour coconut cream over the layers.
 5. Wrap and tie into a bundle.
 6. Bake in an earth oven or steam until done, for about 1 hour.
 7. Serve hot.

Variations: A green or half-ripe pawpaw could be used.



Yam delicious

Six servings:

- 6 pieces of yam (about 5 ozs. or 150 grams each)
 - ¼ cup cooking oil
 - 2 eggs
 - 1 onion, chopped
 - Seasoning (optional)
 - Oil for frying
1. Boil the yam. Mash well.
 2. Add eggs, onion, and seasoning. Mix well.
 3. Form into small balls.
 4. Fry in the hot oil until golden brown.
 5. Serve hot.

Note: Makes a delicious snack for children.

Yam fritters

Four servings:

- 2 cups grated yams (raw)
 - 1 egg
 - ½ cup flour
 - ½ teaspoon baking powder
 - ½ cup water
 - 2 cups oil (for frying)
1. Mix together yam, flour and beaten egg and water.
 2. Drop in spoonfuls into the hot oil.
 3. Fry till golden brown.

Variations: Sweet potatoes, mashed breadfruit, pounded boiled tapioca, or mashed boiled green bananas can be used instead of yams.

Use milk instead of water.

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