

# South Pacific Commission



Community Health  
Services

SOUTH  
PACIFIC  
FOODS

Leaflet  
Revised 1992 **1**

## Taro

### A Pacific speciality

Taro, talo, dalo, dago, aba, anega, aro, ma — these are all names for the plant that has helped provide good nutrition to South Pacific Islanders for hundreds of years. It is thought to have spread to the Pacific from South-East Asia. The names may differ from island to island, but the value of this starchy root crop and its tasty green leaves and stalks stays the same.

On many islands taro root does not play the important part in daily life that it once did. It is often expensive to buy. People who live in towns and work all day sometimes prefer to cook rice rather than growing or buying and preparing taro. Many Pacific Islanders are now buying rice instead of this nourishing root, because rice cooks more quickly.

The Pacific Islands have a very special food in the taro plant. The tuber and the leaves provide the vitamins, minerals and energy the body needs to stay healthy.

Imported European vegetables are costly compared with this health-giving and tasty food plant readily available in the Pacific.



### Types of taro

*Colocasia*, as the scientists call the 'true' taro plant is one of the most widespread root crops throughout the humid tropics. It grows to a height of approximately one metre (about three or four feet) and produces edible roots about thirty centimetres

(twelve inches) long. The leaves and stalks are also included in many island diets.

Other related plants include:

*Cyrtosperma*, a taller plant with bigger leaves and larger, coarser roots. It is most commonly grown in atolls and is called giant taro, or babai (Kiribati), pula'a (Samoa), via (Fiji), pulaka (Tokelau, Tuvalu), simiden (Chuuk).

*Alocasia*, a hardy plant whose thick starchy stem is eaten. It is not as popular as other types. This 'taro' is often eaten when other foods are in short supply. It is found in most islands and called ta'amu (Samoa, Tuvalu), kape (Cook Islands, Tonga).

*Xanthosoma*, an easily grown plant which originated in tropical America, was brought to the South Pacific about one hundred years ago. Called talo futuna (Tonga), tarua (Cook Islands), talo palagi (Samoa), taro Fiji (Vanuatu), it is often grown in

Melanesia, where its pointed leaves as well as its roots are eaten.

For more information on taro varieties and tips on planting, please contact your local agriculture officer.

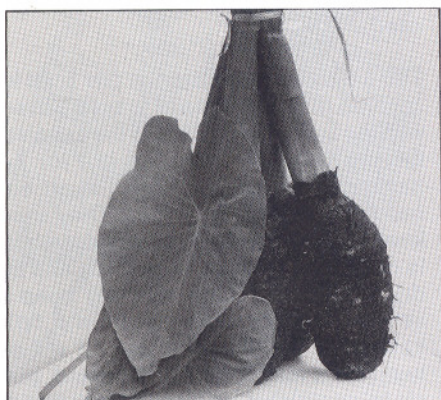
The information and recipes in this leaflet refer to 'true' taro, *Colocasia*, but can be applied to the other types of taro as well.

### Nutritional value

Growing in the ground throughout the islands is a nutritional treasure — the taro plant.

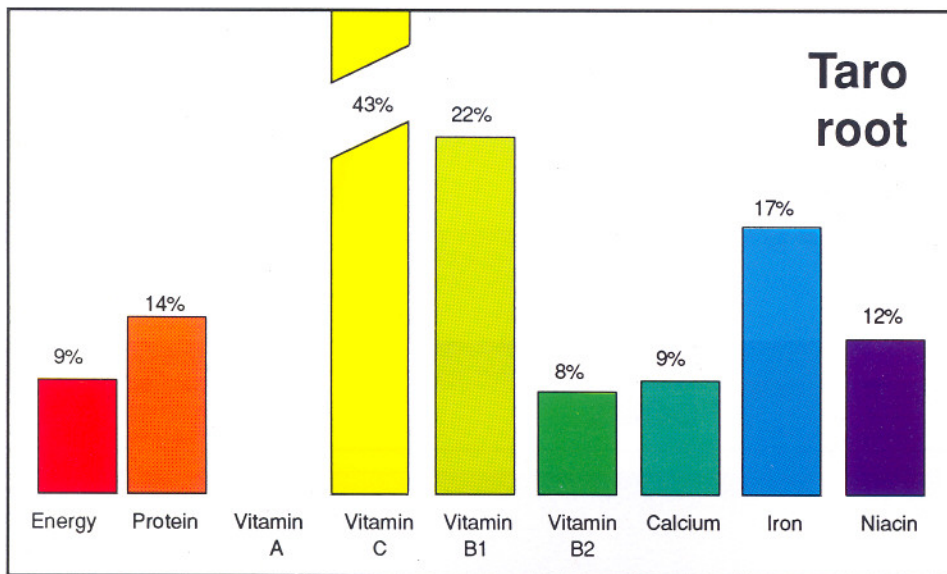
#### The root

**Taro root (tuber)** is an excellent source of **energy**, which the body needs to stay active. It also provides **fibre**, which is needed to make the intestines and bowels work properly.

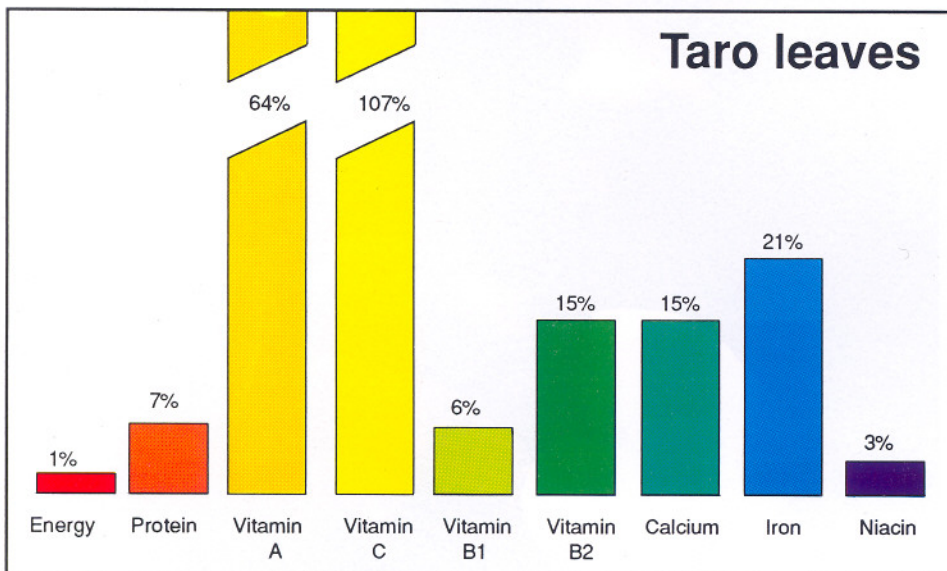


*Colocasia* ('true') taro

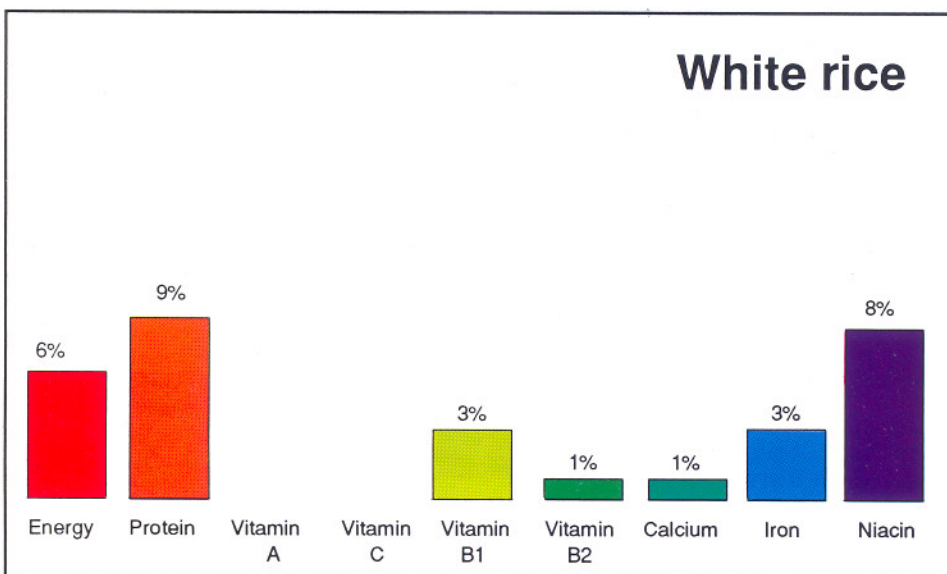




Percentage of daily needs of a child (1—10 yrs) filled by about 2/3 cup (6 oz or 180 gms) of cooked taro root



Percentage of daily needs of a child (1—10 yrs) filled by one serving (about 1/2 cup after cooking) of taro leaves



Percentage of daily needs of a child (1—10 yrs) filled by one cup of cooked rice

When eaten regularly, as it usually is in most rural areas in the Pacific, taro root is also a good source of **calcium** and **iron**. Calcium helps to make strong bones and teeth, and iron helps keep blood healthy. Women and young children need lots of iron in their diet.

## The leaves

**Taro leaves** contain a large amount of **Vitamin A**, which is needed for proper growth, healthy eyes and protection from disease. They are a good source of **Vitamin C** and **Vitamin B2** (riboflavin). Vitamin C keeps the body tissues strong, helps the body use iron and helps chemical actions in the body, and riboflavin is needed for normal growth and healthy eyes.

Taro leaves contain **Vitamin B1** (thiamin), which helps the body use energy foods. Taro leaves also contain useful amounts of calcium and iron.

Everyone should eat some green leafy vegetables every day; taro leaves are one good choice.

The bar graph shows that **polished white rice** provides some energy and protein, but very few vitamins and minerals compared to taro root or leaves. Brown rice contains more nutrients than white rice, but it is still not as nutritious as taro root or leaves. Eating rice alone is not a healthy habit. Rice should always be mixed with green and yellow vegetables and meat or fish to make a healthy complete meal.

The traditional way of eating the root and leaves of the taro plant with fish or meat, or other body-building protein foods, will provide all the nutrients necessary for a healthy and active body.

## Storage and preservation

### The root

After harvesting, most varieties do not keep well. They are best left growing in the ground until ready to be used. (*Xanthosoma* is an exception — placed in a dry, dark and cool place, it will stay fresh for several weeks.) When it is not possible to leave the root in the garden, there are some methods of preservation that can be used.

The tubers can be stored in pits lined with coconut husks or banana leaves, covered with the same materials and then sealed at the top with soil. They will last for 2—3 months. They can be baked in an earth oven until a crust is formed. They should keep for about a week. Another method is to partly boil the root, slice thinly and then dry in the sun. Taro root will keep for several months when stored in a tightly sealed jar, tin or plastic bag. It will also keep for a long time if it is peeled, put in clean containers or plastic bags and frozen.



## The leaves

Taro leaves should always be picked fresh. If you need to keep the leaves for a few days, it is important to make sure they don't go dry. It is better to pick the leaves with the stalks, place in a bowl of water and keep in a cool place. Then they will last for a few days. Taro leaves can also be kept in a refrigerator or cooler; put them in a clear plastic bag with a few holes in it.

## Cooking taro

### The root

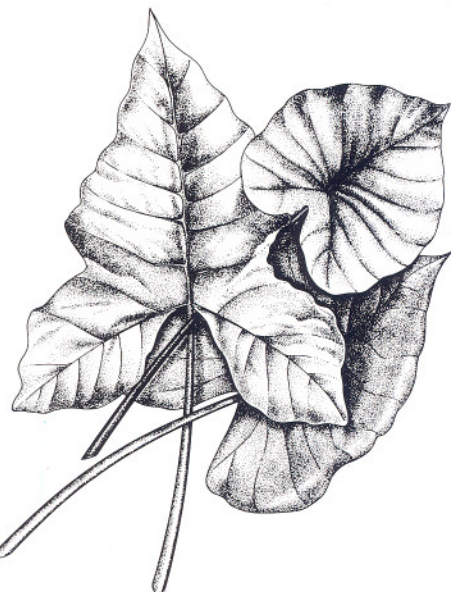
The traditional way of cooking taro whole with the skin on is the best. Common methods include roasting on hot stones, baking in a ground oven and boiling. This will keep the vitamins contained in the skin from being lost.

Some varieties of raw or uncooked taro contain tiny crystals of a substance called calcium oxalate. Chewing raw or half-cooked taro can set free these needle-like crystals and cause an uncomfortable itching in the mouth and throat. Cooking the taro thoroughly will prevent this. When preparing recipes that include grated taro, it is a good idea to cook the root before grating.

### The leaves

Leaves of the 'true' taro, *Colocasia*, are good to eat, but only those that have green or pink (not brown or purple) stalks should be chosen. The leaves of all varieties of taro called *Xanthosoma* can be used.

The leaves as well as the root can make the mouth itch, if they are not prepared and cooked properly. To make certain this does not happen, the leaves should be boiled quickly first in water, then drained and reboiled in a small amount of water or coconut cream. Serving taro leaves with fatty foods such as coconut cream can help the body use the Vitamin A that is also in the leaves.



## The stalk

The green stalks of the 'true' taro plant also make a delicious addition to any meal. The following recipes show how to prepare this special food, and also describe some good methods of preparing the root and leaves.

### Taro leaf soup

*Six servings:*

20 young taro leaves  
4 cups water  
1½ tablespoons butter, margarine or oil  
1 tablespoon chopped onion  
3 cups milk  
1½ rounded tablespoons flour  
Salt and pepper to taste

1. Boil the water, add taro leaves and cook for 10 minutes with the lid on.
2. Drain and set aside.
3. Heat the butter, margarine or oil, and fry onion for one minute.
4. Add flour and stir the mixture over a low heat for one minute.
5. Remove from heat, and stir in milk.
6. Put back on heat, and bring to boil. Add leaves and simmer for 5 minutes, stirring all the time.
7. Add salt and pepper to taste, and serve hot.

Cooked fish or meat and root crops can be added to make the soup a complete meal. Instead of milk, thin coconut cream may be used. This soup recipe is very good for children and sick people.

### Taro in coconut cream

*Four servings:*

2 medium-sized taro roots  
½ cup thick coconut cream  
1 large onion (chopped)  
2 small spring onions (chopped)

1. Peel taro and cut into serving-sized portions.
2. Arrange neatly in a pot, and add enough water to cover.
3. Boil for half an hour or until cooked.
4. Pour cooking water into a clean bowl or jug.
5. Mix together chopped onion, coconut cream and one cup of the cooking water. Mix well into a thin sauce.
6. Pour the coconut sauce on the cooked taro and reheat gently for two minutes.
7. Serve with chopped shallots or spring onions sprinkled on top.

*Note:* Milk can be used instead of coconut cream.

## Taro salad — Baseisei (Fijian style)

*Four servings:*

20 taro stalks  
2 tablespoons lemon juice  
1 cup thin coconut cream  
1 tablespoon chopped spring onion  
Chopped chilli to taste

1. Choose only taro stalks that are pinkish and white. Peel off the outside skin.
2. Cut the stalks into pieces 10 centimetres (4 inches) long.
3. Drop the stalks into boiling water, cover with lid and boil for 2 minutes.
4. Strain the stalks and throw out the cooking water. Put the cooked stalks into a bowl of cold water. When they cool, drain water off.
5. Shred the stalks along their length into thin strips, using a fork.
6. Mix together the lemon juice, coconut cream, spring onion and chilli and pour mixture over the taro stalks.

Fresh or tinned fish added to this recipe makes a tasty dish to serve with cooked taro root, sweet potato, yams or other root crops.

### Taro chicken

*Six servings:*

1 chicken  
2 medium-sized taro  
2 large onions, chopped  
2 cups chopped green leaves (e.g. taro leaves, pumpkin leaves, sweet potato leaves)  
3 tomatoes  
1 cup coconut cream  
1 cup water  
2 tablespoons lemon juice

1. Peel taro. Cut into thin slices and place in the bottom of a large saucepan.
2. Cut the chicken into serving portions and place on top of the taro.
3. Add the chopped onions, green leaves and tomatoes.
4. Sprinkle lemon juice.
5. Add the coconut cream and water and cook over a gentle heat for about 1—1½ hours, or until the chicken is cooked.
6. Serve hot.

This dish can be varied by adding curry powder (about 2 teaspoons) mixed with the coconut cream and water.



## Taro leaves in coconut cream — Palusami (Samoan style)

*Twenty-eight parcels:*

- 12 coconuts
- 4 bundles taro leaves — about 120 leaves
- 5 onions, chopped
- 7 banana leaves
- 28 breadfruit leaves

1. Grate the coconuts. Using fine cheese cloth or coconut fibre, squeeze out the coconut cream.
2. Choose firm, clean banana and breadfruit leaves.
3. Hold each banana leaf over a flame to soften it. Carefully remove the back of the centre stalks from all banana leaves, taking care not to tear the leaves. Divide each banana leaf into 4 pieces.
4. Take 4—6 clean, washed taro leaves and shape them into a cup. Into the centre, put a half tablespoon chopped onion and one cup coconut cream. Fold the leaves in carefully, without spilling the coconut cream.
5. Wrap each taro leaf bundle in a piece of softened banana leaf, then cover with a breadfruit leaf. Secure firmly by tucking the stem underneath the leaf.
6. Cook the parcels in an earth oven or steam for ½ hour.

Chopped pieces of meat or fish may be added to the chopped onion before the coconut cream is added to the parcel. If this is done, cooking time must be increased to at least one hour.

For wrapping, aluminium foil can be used instead of banana and breadfruit leaves.

## Taro with seafood

*Two servings:*

- 2 cups peeled taro root, cut into cubes
- 1 cup shellfish or small fresh fish
- 1½ cups coconut cream
- ½ cup water
- 1 onion, chopped
- 1 tablespoon butter, margarine or oil
- 1 cup taro leaves

1. Cook the taro cubes in boiling water until soft. Drain the taro.
2. Remove the shells from the shellfish or wash and prepare the small fresh fish for cooking.
3. Heat the butter, margarine or oil in a saucepan. Fry the onion for 4—5 minutes.
4. Add the water and coconut cream and stir the mixture until it boils. Add the shellfish or fresh fish and cook gently for 5 minutes.
5. Add the chopped green leaves and cooked taro and cook gently for 5—10 minutes.
6. Add salt and pepper to taste, and serve hot.

Fresh shrimps or leftover meat can be used in this recipe instead of shellfish and small fresh fish.

## Grated taro pudding (Tuvalu)

*Four servings:*

- 2 medium-sized taro
- Banana leaves
- 1 cup coconut cream
- Toddy syrup (optional)

1. Peel the taro, clean and chop into portions.
2. Grate the taro, wrap in softened banana leaves.
3. Bake in an earth oven or steam for one hour.
4. When cooked, cut into squares and mix with coconut cream.
5. Toddy syrup, made from the sap of the coconut flower, can be added for a sweeter taste. (Detailed instructions for making toddy syrup are given in the South Pacific Nutrition Training Book *Preparation of Pacific Island foods*.)



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

- 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 13 — *Sweet potato*
- Leaflet 14 — *Yam*
- Leaflet 15 — *Nuts and seeds*
- Leaflet 16 — *Legumes*
- Leaflet 17 — *Fish*
- Leaflet 18 — *Seafoods*

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