

# South Pacific Commission

Community  
Health Services



South  
Pacific  
Foods

Leaflet  
1990

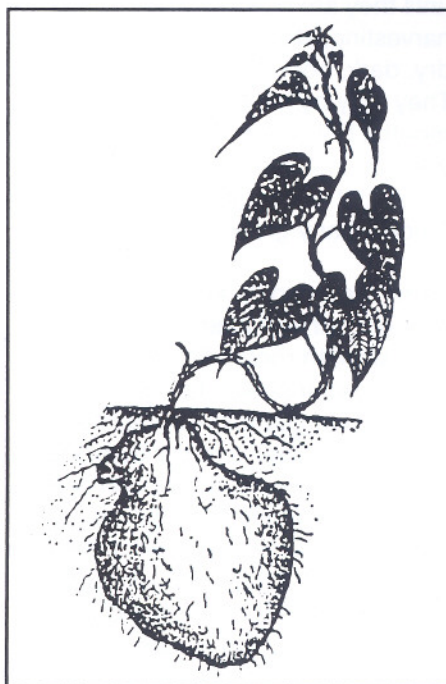
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## Yam

### A status food

In the Pacific, yam is a very popular and important food crop. In some places it is eaten every day, particularly when it is in season. In other places it is eaten only on special occasions. No matter how and when they are used, yams are recognised for their delicious flavour and cultural values.

Yams also have many other good qualities. They can be easily stored for many months. They are very nutritious, and can be cooked in a variety of ways. Yams may be mixed with many foods to make tasty dishes. Special varieties are also important in some cultures as a valuable food for ceremonial occasions.



### Careful cultivation

The yam has the scientific name *Dioscorea*. It is a climbing vine with large underground roots up to 10 feet (3.3 metres) long. These roots have many shapes and may be white, off-white, or purple inside. Over 60 varieties of yams are grown and eaten in the Pacific.

Yams must be grown carefully, in good quality soil, if possible in the place where a new garden is being made. The soil should be deep, loose, and well-drained. Yams do not grow on atolls, where there is not enough soil.

Use a small yam or the top of a large yam as planting material. Yams must be kept free of weeds for the first 3 months.

When the vines start to grow, they are usually trained to grow onto long poles. In smaller gardens, where space is short, they may be trained onto fruit trees. Some varieties of yams twist around a pole to the right, others twist to the left.

After 9–12 months, the yams are ready for harvesting. They are harvested when the leaves are dry. Up to a hundred times more yams may be harvested than the amount that was planted.

## Yam storage

Planting many different kinds of yams that will mature at different times helps to make yams available for longer periods of time during the year. Once harvested, yams will keep well if stored in a dry and well ventilated place. Storage huts are built for this purpose in many different designs and sizes in the Pacific Islands.

## An energy food

Yams are a good source of energy, which the body needs to stay active. Yams also contain modest amounts of **Vitamin B<sub>1</sub>** (thiamin) and **Vitamin C**. Vitamin B<sub>1</sub> (thiamin) helps the body use energy foods and Vitamin C helps to keep the body tissues strong, helps the body to use iron, and aids chemical actions in the body. Yams also provide bulk and some **fibre**, which are needed to make the intestines or bowels work properly.

When eaten in large quantities as they usually are in the Pacific, yams also provide a fair amount of **iron** and **niacin**. Iron helps to keep blood healthy and niacin also helps the body to use energy foods.

Because yams do not contain all of the nutrients needed for good health, they should be eaten with other foods for a balanced diet. Health-giving protective foods, such as dark green leafy vegetables, and body-building foods, such as fish, meat, peanuts and milk, should be eaten along with yams. That way the body will have enough of the different foods it needs to stay healthy and be strong.

Mashed and added to other foods such as fruits, dark green vegetables, or fish, yams make a good food for young babies.

Eating local foods saves money for families who are able to grow their own food. From the bar graphs, it can be seen that yams are nutritionally better than store foods, such as white bread, because they provide plenty of energy and some protein, as well as a variety of minerals and vitamins. White bread

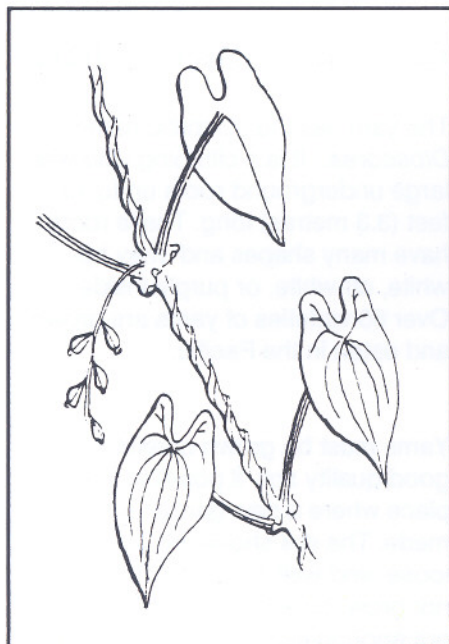
provides the same amount of energy, but very few minerals and vitamins. Yams can be eaten with other foods such as meat, fish, shellfish, vegetables and green leaves. White bread, because it is normally eaten with high energy foods such as butter, margarine, jam etc., provides a lot more energy than yams. This may lead to overweight and obesity.

## Preparation

To take advantage of the nutrients found in yams, they must be prepared in the right ways. Cooking methods which do not let air or water touch the yams should be used. Use methods such as **roasting** them in their skins over hot coals or **baking** them whole in a hot earth oven. The best way to keep all the goodness found in yams is to cook them in their skins and then remove the skin afterwards. Boiling peeled yams in water does not save the vitamins unless the water is also used.

Yams can be cooked with other foods such as fish, chicken, or shell-fish, along with coconut cream. They can be used in soups or stews; this makes good use of the vitamins found in yams because the cooking water is not thrown away.

Some varieties of yams also make good curries, taking the place of potatoes. They can be used in stuffings for chicken or fish.



Yams can also be fried. To fry yams, first peel the skin. Cut into cubes, slices, or strips. Soak in salted, cold water for a few minutes. Remove from the water and dry with a cloth. Fry in hot cooking oil until golden brown. When frying yams that have already been boiled, it is not necessary to soak them in cold water first.

Some kinds of yams are poisonous and must be prepared very carefully. Normally these varieties are not eaten or sold in the market as food. They are found in the bush. If there is any question as to whether a variety of yam is poisonous or not, ask your local agricultural extension officer or people who are familiar with the different varieties before preparing the yam.

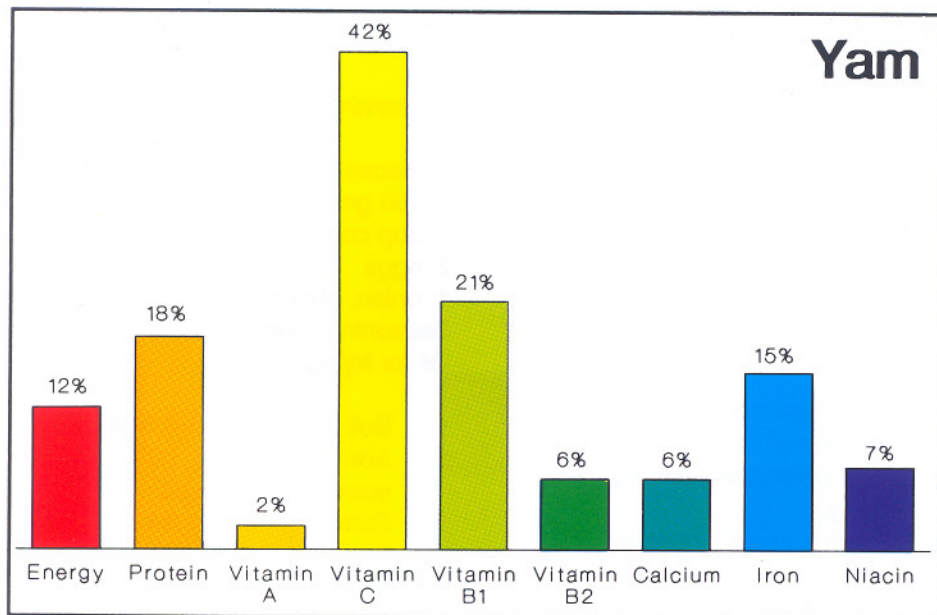
Traditional methods normally used to remove the poison include washing the yam in cold water, repeated cooking, and adding lemon juice to the cooking water. In some areas, a glue is made from these poisonous yams. The thick liquid is used in making bark cloth.



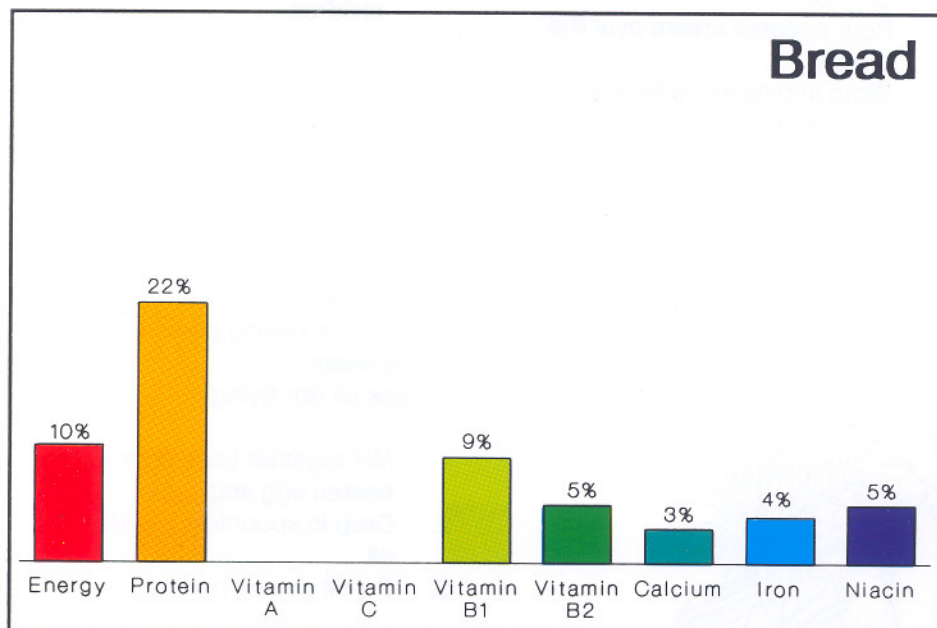
## Preservation

Yams keep well if left in the ground until they are needed. After harvesting, store in a place that is dry, dark, cool, and well-ventilated. They may be kept for several months if stored properly. Check them occasionally to remove any yams that are beginning to go bad. Pinch off any growing shoots.

Yams may also be kept for later eating by drying them. Use only firm, smooth roots. Steam them whole and unpeeled for about 30 – 40 minutes until cooked, but not too soft. Peel and cut them into thin slices, then dry in the sun or in a solar drier until the slices are extremely leathery. This will take about 3 days. Dried, the yam slices may be stored and later used in soups or stews. Dried yam may be ground and used as flour.



Percentage of daily needs of an adult woman filled by 1 cup or 2-3 small pieces of yam (raw).



Percentage of daily needs of an adult woman filled by 2 thick slices of bread (white).

## Yam Salad

Six servings:

- 5 cups cooked yam
- 2 onions, chopped
- 1 cup salad cream
- 1 lettuce
- 2 medium tomatoes
- 2 hard-boiled eggs

1. Cut the cooked yam into cubes.
2. Mix together in a dish the yam, onion, and salad cream.
3. Serve cold with lettuce and tomatoes and sliced hard-boiled eggs.

## Salad cream

One cup:

- 2 hard-boiled egg yolks
- ½ cup instant skim or full-cream milk powder
- 4 teaspoons sugar (optional)
- 5 teaspoons lemon juice
- ½ cup water
- 4 teaspoons cooking oil

1. Mash the cooked egg yolk well with the instant milk powder.
2. Add the sugar.
3. Add the lemon juice and water very slowly. Mix in well.
4. Slowly add the cooking oil.
5. Serve with yam salad or any fresh green salad.

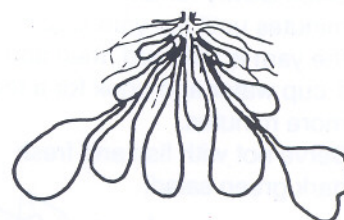
## Boiled yam in coconut cream

Four servings:

- 2 cups diluted coconut cream (from 2 coconuts)
- 8 pieces of yam (about 5 oz. or 150 grams each)
- 16 taro or slippery edible hibiscus (*bele*) leaves

1. Prepare coconut cream.
2. Peel yams and chop into average size pieces.
3. Fill up pot with yam pieces until they fill about three-quarters of the pot.
4. Pour in coconut cream.
5. Cover with taro leaves before putting the lid on.
6. Boil for 30-45 minutes or until yams are cooked.
7. Serve hot as a breakfast dish.

Note: Soft varieties of yams are best cooked this way.



## Stuffed yam with cheese

Four servings:

- 1 small yam
- 1 cup flaked cooked fish
- 1 large tomato, chopped
- 1 cup milk or coconut cream
- ½ cup grated cheese

1. Bake the yam with the skin on until cooked.
2. Cut it in half while still hot. Take out the flesh, leaving the skin whole in the shape of a boat, and mash it with a fork.
3. Mix the flesh with the flaked fish, chopped tomato, and milk or coconut cream.
4. Put the yam mixture back into the skin.
5. Sprinkle grated cheese on top.
6. Bake for about 15 - 20 minutes or until the cheese melts.
7. Serve hot.

## 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.

This leaflet is the fourteenth 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 13 – Sweet potato  
 Leaflet 15 – Nuts and seeds  
 Leaflet 16 – Legumes  
 Leaflet 17 – Fish  
 Leaflet 18 – Seafoods

Published by the South Pacific Commission and printed by Stredder Print Limited, Auckland, New Zealand.

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Original text: English.

Reprinted 1995. Reprinted in 1998 with financial assistance from the Territory of New Caledonia.

South Pacific Commission Cataloguing-in-publication data

Yam: a status food  
 (South Pacific foods leaflet ; 14)

1. Yams 2. Cookery (Yams)  
 I. South Pacific Commission. Community Health Services. II. Series

641.3523  
 ISBN 982-203-453-9

AACR2

Copies of this and other leaflets in this series can be obtained from:

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 (Nutrition Programme)  
 South Pacific Commission  
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