



Yacon — What is it?

Yolanda Silva, Nutrition Educator, UC Cooperative Extension-Alameda

Yacon (*Smallanthus sonchifolius*) is a member of the Asteraceae family and is a relative of sunflowers, dahlias, Jerusalem artichokes and many other common edible and ornamental plants. Yacon is also known as Bolivian sun root, Peruvian ground apple and “yacon strawberry.”

Similar to a sunflower in appearance, the plant typically grows 4 to 8 feet tall, depending on variety. Flowers form at about 6 1/2 months after planting. They resemble small sunflowers and attract bees and other beneficial insects.

Although originally from the



Andes, yacon grows easily in most climates and is very forgiving and adaptable. The optimum growth temperature being 65° to 77° F, yacon can tolerate temperatures as high as 104° F if water is available. Yacon is now cultivated in Hawaii, Canada and California. It is becoming a popular plant and can easily be grown in home gardens, requiring very little expertise or farming experience. Possibly the only way to get fresh, unprocessed yacon may be to grow your own.

The edible part of the plant is its cluster of storage roots. They can reach 8 inches, and one plant can provide more than a dozen large roots, or up to 12 pounds of edible roots. The roots are crisp, very juicy, and mildly sweet, and are used more as a fruit than a vegetable. The flavor of yacon is often described as a mixture of apple, pear and jicama.

One of the best features of yacon is that it remains crisp even after being cut or cooked. However, it oxidizes rather quickly so immediately after peeling one should add lemon juice to keep it white and crisp.

Yacon is usually grown from chunks of rhizome or from cuttings. Like many of the tubers, it almost never produces seeds. A single yacon plant can generate enough rhizome to start up to ten new plants. The

plants are quite resistant to pests and disease. Yacon is harvested after the rhizomes at the top of the plant die and fall back, meaning that the tube under the ground is ready to be eaten.

As far as nutrients, when freshly harvested, yacon has very little caloric value; it is mostly water, and its energy is largely in the form of fructooligosaccharides (FOS), large sugar molecules that are mostly indigestible by humans. Freshly harvested yacon has about 66 calories per pound.

Because the sugar is not digestible in humans, there are several claims that yacon can help to control insulin, making it an excellent food source for people with diabetes and those seeking to lose weight. Yacon is also a good source of fiber and is rich in potassium, calcium and phosphorous, and it contains probiotic materials, stimulating the growth and health of the microflora in our bodies.

The most common way of eating yacon is freshly harvested. Just peel it and add lemon juice. You can use it in salads or spring rolls, or cook it in stir fries, soups and baking goods. Pickling it is very popular in Japan and Korea. And many health food stores carry yacon syrup and yacon tea made from the leaves.