

Growing Taro

Colocasia esculenta

The plant

Taro, also known as elephant's ears, arvi or patra, *Colocasia esculenta* is one of the oldest and most prolific crops known, having been cultivated for about 7000 years. A tropical root and leaf crop, it is grown throughout the tropics, and there are hundreds of named cultivars.

All forms of taro are grown from tubers, not seed. Happiest in a tropical swamp, it makes a good, if rather large houseplant, and can be readily grown indoors in the UK. The very large leaves are more or less heart shaped, come in various shades of green and often have a slight bloom on their surface. Stems may be red, very pale green or near black and again are often heavily bloomed like a plum. A healthy taro plant will reach over 1m/3ft in all directions, so you will need plenty of space!

Varieties and plant material

In the UK there are generally two forms of *Colocasia esculenta* available: *C. esculenta* var. *esculenta*, sometimes called dasheen or cocoyam, and eddoe, *C. esculenta* var. *antiquorum*.

Dasheen has few large tubers, often looking similar to an Amaryllis bulb. They are sold at football sized or bigger; relatively smooth textured with pale coloured adventitious buds on the upper surface where new growth will form.

Dasheen tubers have yellow or brown to deep maroon skins, their flesh is pink, white or yellow, with a mealy texture. Dasheen needs high temperatures, humidity and rich soil to grow well.

Eddoe has many smaller, oval tubers, the size of a clementine, with a thin covering of brownish hairs. The tuber skin is usually brown and the flesh can be pinkish, cream, yellow or orange.



Eddoe tastes nuttier than dasheen, with a firmer textured flesh. The plants are better for growing outdoors in the UK, as they withstand colder and drier conditions slightly better than dasheen tubers: they also need less nutrients.

There are a huge number of different varieties of taro, as is to be expected from a crop which has been grown over such a wide geographical area for so long.

Both eddoe and dasheen may contain calcium oxalate crystals, in the leaves and sometimes in the tubers. These are not toxic but cause a very unpleasant and uncomfortable burning sensation to the hands or mouth and throat if



Eddoe leaves



Dasheen leaves

handled roughly or eaten raw. The amount of calcium oxalate present varies greatly according to variety and possibly growing conditions. Never eat raw *Colocasia* leaves and if you have sensitive skin, handle the plants using gloves. Most edible *Colocasias* don't flower, but if they do the insignificant flowers are heavily scented.

Planting and site

Eddoe is usually slightly easier than dasheen to start into growth (and because it has smaller tubers is cheaper to try out.) There are a few seed suppliers who sell plants, or you can buy tubers sold for food at an Asian or Caribbean shop. Look for firm weighty tubers: if you are lucky you may find some with small sprouts on, but otherwise plant them about half their depth in a gritty compost, water well and keep somewhere warm – an airing cupboard is ideal – at 30°C for several days. You should start to see shoots within a couple of weeks, but breaking dormancy depends on a number of factors, including how long the roots have been harvested for and if they have been treated with a sprout suppressant. If the tuber doesn't shoot, but looks healthy, don't worry: they can take several months to emerge.

Once a shoot has developed, bring the plants into a light place but keep warm and free from draughts. *Colocasias* are gross feeders and appreciate a rich but well draining compost – a mixture of equal parts garden compost, loam and grit is suitable. During the growing season keep the plants damp and feed weekly. Taro will thrive in sun or semi-shade and could be grown in a large pot outdoors if you have a sheltered sunny patio. Remember these plants are not hardy, and need temperatures above 16°C/60°F to grow.

Taro will survive (although they may look unhappy) short periods of 10°C/50°F but will be damaged below this. As the days shorten, reduce watering and stop feeding. The plants will lose their leaves if they get too cold but usually grow again from the base once conditions warm up.

A steamy bathroom, conservatory or warm office is the ideal growing space – as mature plants will reach over 1m tall you will need plenty of room. The large leaves make a taro plant look very dramatic, and can be snipped off to eat if they are getting in the way too much.

Pests, weeds and diseases

Many taro tubers sold for food are infected with viruses, and this may show up as distortion or mottling and variegation on the leaves. Although occasionally attractive to the grower of ornamentals, virus infection will diminish crop yields and can be fatal.

In the tropics the main problems are taro leaf blight, a devastating disease and taro beetle, neither of which occur in the UK. Otherwise, in this country the young tubers can be attractive to slugs, snails and sciarid fly, mostly when just beginning to shoot. Young plants are also susceptible a number of root rots, especially if kept too cold or too wet before they have developed a proper root system. Good hygiene, keeping plants sufficiently warm and free draining compost all help to prevent these problems.

Mature plants can be affected by whitefly or red spider mite but are otherwise healthy.

Harvesting and storage

Before harvesting roots, restrict watering to obtain the largest tubers, until the leaves are dying down. You can expect a small harvest of tubers within 18 months of planting and a crop of leaves two or three times a year. Cropping the leaves doesn't seem to affect the tuber yields provided the plant is growing actively and is well fed and watered after cutting.

The fleshy stalks are often added to soups as a thickening agent, as are the cooked peeled tubers. Tubers should be well washed before cooking, or allowed to dry before storage. They don't last for longer than a few weeks, becoming shrivelled in warm dry air or rotting if kept too cold.

Once you have harvested your root crop, save one to start a new plant.

This leaflet is produced as part of the Sowing New Seeds Project. This is funded by Big Lottery's Local Food Fund and has produced a resource of information on growing advice, experiences and seeds to promote growing of exotic produce in the UK.

For further information visit www.sowingnewseeds.org.uk
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