A RICH AND UNIQUE HERITAGE OF CROP DIVERSITY IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

Taro

North-east India is a centre of origin and diversity of cultivated and wild taro species

DIVERSITY

Taro (Colocasia esculenta) is a root and leaf crop eaten in tropical to temperate areas throughout the world. It probably originated as a crop in the area between north-east India and south-west China, a region that possesses a great number of different cultivated varieties, and many wild relatives that are more or less closely related.

Wild populations of taro that flower and breed can be found throughout the warm, wet monsoonal regions of Asia and the western Pacific, from south and south-east Asia to northern Australia. Some of these populations appear to be derived from cultivated taros, and can also be eaten. Others are not eaten at all, or only as famine food.

USES

Depending on the variety, the edible parts of taro include: large mother corms, small round to oval child corms, short thick stolons (runners), long thin stolons, leaf stems, leaf blades, and young spathes (the visible yellow part surrounding the hidden flowers of taro). The corms are starchy and can be boiled, baked, fried, and steamed after peeling, cutting or mashing. The leaves and stolons are frequently eaten as a vegetable and represent an important source of vitamins, especially folic acid. The leaf blades and stems can be cooked and preserved, or dried and cooked later. In India and elsewhere, the leaves can be used as an edible wrapping cooked with other foods. In the Philippines, leaves are commonly eaten in sour soups, or together with coconut and other ingredients. The spathes are a delicacy in some food cultures of Asia and the Pacific. The corms and leaves are used for medicinal purposes, and also as healthy fodder for pigs throughout south-east Asia.

CULTURAL IMPORTANCE

Taro in many cultures is a sacred plant with high prestige and strong cultural and symbolic importance – it may be presented on formal occasions, in domestic or agricultural rituals, in religious and other feasts, and as bride price or compensation.

The many different cultivated varieties are adapted to different environmental conditions. Some are cold tolerant and grow well in dryland or upland fields. These can be found in the low mountain areas of Himalaya and Meghalaya and across mainland Southeast Asia to the temperate regions of China, Korea, and Japan. Other varieties are usually cultivated in warm and wet conditions, especially in lowland irrigated or flooded pond fields. These kinds are widespread in tropical and subtropical Asia and the Pacific Islands. Among the wild near relatives, are also species that can be eaten, usually for the leaves.

Many wild taro populations, and many wild relatives, grow in the mountain regions between north-east India and south-west China, and it is from these regions that the tropical and temperate lineages of cultivated taro may originate.

Sources: