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Yacón for the win

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: Yacón, a yam-size tuber, offers winter sustenance and sweet syrup in abundance. This bulky root tastes like a combination of apple, pear and celery. (Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

As the outdoors cools, darkens and dampens, we might think about retiring inside for more of the day, perhaps with something rich and sweet. Hibernation protects certain animals' metabolic processes from cold and reduced caloric intake, and we are no less subject to it despite our houses, woolens and fleece.

Our climate doesn't spoil Olympic Peninsuleers for choice in producing rich sweetness. We have a limited ability to make an excellent maple syrup from our bigleaf maples. Where we are able to provide them adequate nectary, we can raise bees. But the easiest method comes from the Andes, where a yam-size tuber called yacón (ya-KON) offers winter sustenance and sweet syrup in abundance.

This bulky root tastes like a combination of apple, pear and celery. Some of mine have had hints of watermelon. Its texture of water chestnut or jicama has been delicious in winter salads. It keeps well when sliced without browning or losing its delightful crunch. I've read that it keeps this texture even when stewed, though I have always emptied my reserves into salads.

Andean tubers love our climate; the best-known example is the potato, of which Washington is the nation's second-largest producer. Annuals like potatoes need to be rotationally planted to prevent disease buildup such as the mosaic virus. Perennial root vegetables offer the greatest sustainability and flexibility.

This is not to say that yacón is immune to viruses. The indefatigable plant breeder Cultivariable in Moclips reports that tomato spotted wilt has affected its yacón, and that yacón necrotic mottle virus has impacted crops in South Korea and the European Union. This still appears to be less of a problem than it is in potatoes, which have been more extensively bred for a longer time, undermining their immunities in the service of desirable food traits. Yacón's wild populations in Colombia, Ecuador and Peru may still be contributing resilience to domestic plantings there.

My solution to disease vulnerability has been to rotate the crown divisions. Even with perennials, I like to be cautious: isolating individual plants, slowly spreading their divisions, and uprooting establishments after a few years.

When harvesting the massive tubers (up to 20" long), the crown, a cluster of unpalatable fibrous rhizomes, is separated from the tubers and divided to make further propagules. These are sown to make

another yacón plant. One yacón over time could produce a field of plants; indeed, this clonal method is more effective than seed and has been responsible for most of yacón's spread.

Whether harvested or bought, I've planted these rhizomes below an inch of soil in spring. They do well in tilled, amended ground and insanely well in raised beds, where they produce 8'+ plants. Because they dominated my beds this year I'll be proceeding with in-ground planting.

I have struggled with clonal propagation, mainly because slugs can destroy young yacón in spring. Most years have been good for my yacón on Harstine Island. (Last year was terrible.) This has been a boom year from which I expect to save a few very large crowns and innumerable tubers. I am afraid to dig up the bundles because I'm not sure I can store them all. I continue to experiment with in-ground storage, having suffered no mole or vole losses.

Recent early frosts have made me unsure about yields. The 8' tall aerial growths, with their palm-size spreading leaf umbrellas, may have protected the bulging tuber bases. Frost damage shows on many leaves. In such circumstances, hilling soil over the tubers is a good idea, protecting them until a late November/early December harvest for maximum development.

Should you be saddled with more yacón than you can eat or store, making syrup is an option I may yet explore. It has been touted as a dietary supplement and low-calorie alternative sweetener, as well as a prebiotic full of immune-enhancing and anticancer compounds. Prebiotics like inulin (present in sunchokes, burdock root and chicory root) and fructooligosaccharides (in yacón, agave and Alliums — onions, garlic, leeks) have exciting implications for digestive health as well as home fermentation — think sauerkraut, kimchi, kefir, kombucha — and food storage.

I look forward to sharing the bounty!

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*

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