

COLOCASIA ESCULENTA

Continuing her series concentrating on plants suitable for growing indoors or in a conservatory, TANIA COMPTON admires the edible arum, the taro

The Arum family has its fair share of eccentric members, with the stinking Titan arum *Amorphophallus titanum* at the head of a long line of weird and wonderful plants. Each of this beast's rarely occurring flowers, gargantuan versions of our native Lords and Ladies, gives off a vile odour of rotting flesh, but people queue in droves to be repelled and fascinated when and wherever it flowers. If the Titan arum bags the prize for having the largest and stinkiest flower, its aroid relation *Colocasia esculenta*, the taro, gets top marks for being the earliest-recorded edible plant.

According to Deni Bown in *Aroids* (published by Century in 1988), the taro featured on primitive menus before 10,000BC, and may have been cultivated for over 4,000 years. Supposedly originating in eastern India, but now grown in any climate where copious rainfall is matched by above-zero temperatures, the taro has been adopted as one of the world's most widely cultivated foodstuffs. Food 'stuff' adequately sums it up. In Hawaii, taro is eaten as a porridge-like gloop called poi, but it does not surprise me that, since its beginnings in Neolithic times, cereal cultivation has maintained its greater share in world agriculture. Gazing on *Colocasia* leaves is preferable to grazing on them.

Nature has endowed this plant with exquisitely shaped leaves threaded with a sensational pattern of veins, but to prevent these beauties being gobbled in the wild, the whole plant is laced with toxic crystals of calcium oxalate. In *Cooking with Exotic Fruits and Vegetables* (Henry Holt & Co, 1986), Jane Grigson writes about following a recipe for boiled leaf stalks. 'My daughter drained it and nibbled a bit. I nibbled a bit. All right but rather overcooked we decided. Then our throats began to ache in a strange way, as if they were swelling up. We stood and looked at one another too frightened to speak, fearing that we were soon going to be unable to breathe.' Only after a lot of water did the sensation vanish. She perseveres with some interesting-sounding recipes but stark warnings that this plant needs thorough cooking.

Despite the sting in its tail, the taro has become central to the cuisine of almost every equatorial culture, and the reason for this is the ease with which you can grow it. The South-east Asians who sailed in their double-hulled boats between 1,000BC and 1,000AD to settle in Polynesia survived because their cargo of dormant taro tubers sprang back to life when planted. This reliability, coupled with its nourishing vitamins and starches, non-allergenic proteins and carbohydrates, led to the taro becoming the staple food for slaves - it accompanied

them on their desperate, enforced migrations around the globe.

As with any plant that moves around the world, *C. esculenta* has been bred and crossbred many times to create cultivars that will adapt to diverse situations. The Chinese cultivar *C.e. 'Bun-long'* contains a low concentrate of toxic crystals, enabling it to be used in stir-fries. And selective breeding for food crops delivers the supplementary benefits of choice and variety for the gardener. Some taros have leaves that are thin and pointed like needles; some are wide and fat. There are forms with ruby-red stems, red veins, black leaves with white veins, purple leaves with black veins. The straight species *C. esculenta* is a handsome plant that when mature forms clumps a metre wide and tall with leaves 30-40cm long, but many of its sports or cultivars are more impressive. The form shown below, *C. e. 'Illustris'*, likes to be kept in the shade or filtered sun which causes its leaves to become powdery purple-black shot through by

The taro has nourished mankind since before 10,000bc - presumably because it is easy to grow. It is valued by gardeners for its ravishing leaves - when kept in the shade, those of *colocasia esculenta* 'Illustris' (below) turn powdery purple-black shot through with deep-green veins

deep-green veins. *C. e. 'Black Magic'*, on the other hand, will only keep its spectacular purple hue if exposed to sunlight. The leaves and stems of *C. e. 'Fontanesii'*, known as the Violet Elephant's Ear, may not be as purple as 'Black Magic', but it is an altogether easier plant to grow and overwinter. The stems of these giants can get up to 2 metres thick in a single season, and each leaf can measure up to 60cm long.

For something that looks so exotic, *Colocasia* plants are not hard work. They need a similar level of nurturing to the so-called hardy banana plants, or even dahlias. *Colocasia* tubers need over-wintering in a dry, sandy mix in a frost-free zone, and should only be brought into growth when the temperature in your greenhouse or conservatory is stable at around the 20°C mark, night and day. Plant them into humus-rich but loose compost and give them a copious regime of food and water. Pot them on until they are getting top heavy; or before the stage when turning them upside down to get them out of their old pot might damage the unfurling leaves - some *Colocasia* leaves are almost as beautiful in their tight, Havana cigar-like unopened state. The final summer pot should be a generous, 10 litre-capacity affair. Watering is a question of trial and error —veer on the side of generous, and in the case of *C. e. 'Illustris'*, stand the pot in a tray of water to sate its apparently unquenchable thirst. *Colocasia* is the gunnera of the tropical world.

Hawaiian legend states that anyone who has been hunting for porpoises must not enter a field where *Colocasia* is growing, as they will ease the crop to ruin. You have been warned

