

## Yacon

### PLANTING DETAILS

Yacon actually produces two types of underground tubers, reddish rhizomes directly at the base of the stem, which can be eaten when young but are mainly used for propagation and the larger brown tubers, which are mainly eaten. When harvesting we separate the reddish rhizomes from the tubers and wash off any soil, taking care not to break the skin. The brown tubers are dried in the sun and then stored. The reddish rhizomes are kept out of the sun and covered with slightly damp sand, sawdust or cocopeat to stop them drying out and put aside for replanting in a dark, dry place. As soon as the rhizomes begin to sprout it is time to plant. Prepare the soil by loosening well with a fork and working in compost. To plant, cover a large rhizome which has several sprouts, with soil to a depth of 3 cm. Mulch well, yacon will grow up through the mulch, just like potatoes. Little weeding is needed as dense shade is created as the yacon grows. Plants are large and vigorous, so space them at least 0.5 metres apart. Yacon grows fast even in poor soils but crops best in rich, friable, well-drained soil. Yacon can be planted all year round in frost-free areas as it is day-length neutral. It appears to be drought tolerant compared to other vegetable crops and so far, pest-free.

### HARVEST

The plant takes 6 - 7 months to reach maturity. After flowering top growth withers and dies back and the tubers are harvested. They resemble dahlia or sweet potato tubers, on average weigh about 300 g but can weigh up to 2 kg. Once the soil starts to heave at the base of the plant, dig around to 'bandicoot' a few early tubers to extend the harvest season. The tubers continue to sweeten as the plant dies back so the main harvest should only take place once all the top growth is dead, usually by May. Don't leave it too long though, especially in areas that have mild winters, as the plant will start to shoot again as the weather warms up and the days get longer. The plant needs to be dug carefully to avoid damage to the crisp tubers. After separation from the central stem undamaged tubers can be stored in a cool, dark and dry place with good air circulation for some months. The average sugar content of the tubers increases during storage because of starch conversion. They can also be exposed to the sun for up to 2 weeks to accelerate the sweetening process.

### EATING

We prefer to eat yacon raw. First remove the outer brown skin and inner white skin by peeling with a knife as the skin has a resinous taste, to reveal the amber colored sweet crunchy flesh. Like all tubers there are no seeds to remove, so it is quick and easy to prepare. Chop the tuber into chunks and add it to green salads where they impart a great flavor and texture. It can also be used in potato salad and Waldorf salads. When cut into long strips, they make an interesting addition to a plate of raw vegetable crudité's for dipping into your favorite guacamole or cream cheese dip. It can also be boiled, steamed or baked with other vegies. In cooking they stay sweet and slightly crisp. If boiled 'in the jacket' the skin separates from the flesh and can be peeled off like a boiled egg. Yacon can also be used in a dessert crumble or pie with apples, pears or choko. The tubers juice well in an electric juicer and can be used to sweeten other juices or used in juice combinations. In the Andes, they are grated and squeezed through a cloth to yield a sweet refreshing drink. The juice can also be boiled down to produce syrup. In South America the juice is concentrated to form dark brown blocks of sugar called chancaca. The young stem can be used as a cooked vegetable. Nutritionally yacon is low in calories but it is said to be high in potassium.