

MORE FROM FORSTER'S ESCULENTIS

E.D. Hatch

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Apium graveolens Linn. [strong smelling, = Apium australe]

Abundant in NZ by the seashore; also collected on Easter Island and within the tropics on submerged islands. Known by the natives to occur in immense quantities, this is for sailors surely a most agreeable and beneficial relief from scurvy.

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Arum esculentum Linn. [edible, = Colocasia esculenta]

The Javanese call this species tallas, the Tahitians and the natives of NZ call it tallo or tarro. Found cultivated everywhere in all the islands of the southern ocean within the tropics, except on desert and submerged islands; also in the extreme north of NZ.

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Convolvulus chrysorrhizus Solander [golden root, = Ipomoea batatas]

This species of Convolvulus has a large, tuberous, starchy, deep yellow root, with a sickly sweet flavour. On the islands of the Pacific Ocean between the tropics, in situations out of the sun; also beyond the tropic in Easter Island and in the northern part of NZ, it is found everywhere as a cultivated plant.

This is probably a variety of Convolvulus batatas but the late Dr. Solander, who saw the plant in flower, considered it to be a new species and gave it the name Convolvulus chrysorrhizus, as is recorded by Parkinson - Journal p. 37.

[See Parkinson's drawing of a flowering plant from Tahiti in W.T. Stearn Endeavour 27: January 1968. p. 6. Actually Solander also considered the NZ form to be a valid species as well and named it C. dulcis - Primitiae Florae NZ: typescript p. 51. He gave the Maori name as kumala (= kumara) and listed a Parkinson drawing].

If we believe with Rumphius that Convolvulus batatas Linn. was unknown or unrecognised in the Philippine and Moluccan islands before the arrival of the Spanish from Central America, then these new arguments confirm the opinion of the distinguished Dr. Solander. Certainly the natives of Amboina, Banda, Ternate and Baly applied the distinguishing name of castela, from the Spanish castilianis, to C. batatas, but the Spaniards nevertheless accepted the species as indigenous.

The Tahitians and other peoples of the southern ocean consider their species, which they call umara, or with the aspirate gumarra or gumala, to be characteristic of their own islands.

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Coriaria sarmentosa F. [with rhizomes or stolons]

Grows naturally in NZ among shrubs and in scrub. The natives of this region, particularly those who lived near Dusky Bay, collected and ate the berry-like fruits of this shrub.

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Dacrydium cupressinum Solander [resembling the cypress]

This very beautiful genus is related to Taxus. I have not seen the inflorescence but accept the name Dacrydium given to it by the distinguished Dr. Solander.

While in NZ Cook ordered a drink to be brewed from the young branchlets, which are laden with delicate leaves and exude a resinous material. I must praise its excellence as a substitute for beer in the treatment of those ill with the scurvy. It will also quickly alleviate the nausea and giddiness induced by lack of food. A similar drink, called spruce beer by the sailors, can be prepared from cuttings of the North American Pinus canadensis.

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Dioscorea alata Linn. [winged]

This is certainly the D. alata of Linnaeus [Solander called it D. sativa Linn.] as it occurs in the East and West Indies, in equatorial Africa, throughout the islands of the southern ocean within the torrid zone, and even as far away as NZ. Cultivated by the natives on account of the very pleasant flavoured and wholesome roots, which are roasted or simply heated, and eaten in place of bread.

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Lepidium oleraceum F. [vegetable in the culinary sense]

In NZ about the shores of Queen Charlotte's Sound, particularly in sandy places in the partial shade of scrub. The sailors had it as a vegetable, with the Apium and Tetragonia halimifolia, every day while we remained in this harbour. Among antiscorbutic foods it has at no time been sufficiently praised; the taste is pleasant though somewhat bitter, similar to that of spinach or lettuce. A mild but rather flatulent laxative.

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Melaleuca scoparia F. [the domestic broom - hence brushwood, =Leptospermum scoparium]

I could hardly have included this small NZ tree in my account, if the Europeans who accompanied Cook on his voyages round the world and to the southern islands, had not made an infusion of its delicate leaves and freshly flower-laden twigs, and drunk it in place of tea. Pleasantly aromatic and fragrant but very bitter, this drink will nevertheless quickly restore the health of those suffering from scurvy.

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Polypodium medullare F. [the edible pith, = Cyathea medullaris]

This species of fern is frequent in the forests of NZ and is called mamagu [=mamaku] by the natives, who roast and eat the pith of the root and lower stem. A soft and pulpy substance, with an abundant reddish glutinous sap, it has a taste like that of turnip but rather better, and in this it approaches the pith of the sago tree.

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Sonchus oleraceus Linn. [see Lepidium]

Found fairly frequently in NZ and in the Friendly Islands [Tonga]. Its delicate stems and young leaves made a salad for our enjoyment.

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Tetragonia halimifolia F. [with leaves like Atriplex, = Tetragonia tetragonioides]

In NZ; on flat scrubby places in coastal forest and in sand. Also within the tropics on the shores of Tongatabu. Among the most excellent of vegetables but rarely used by the natives. The immortal Cook [is this a pun?] while in harbour, ordered this plant to be served to the sailors every day, both for breakfast and for dinner

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Tacca pinnatifida F. [the cleft leaf, = Tacca leontopetaloides]

[This is not a NZ species. I have translated it in another context and it seemed a pity to waste it - EDH.]

The uncooked root of Tacca is I swear among the most bitter and pungent I have tasted, although this quality is somewhat mitigated in cultivated plants.

The raw root is scraped and the scrapings kneaded in water, which is drained off and the process repeated, once, twice, thrice, until at length the starchy flour is very white and has no pungent taste. It is next made into a lye or infusion [with wood ashes?], thoroughly agitated and the liquid thrown away, thus removing from the root its harmful, indeed lethal properties. The flour is finally poured into a container and set out to dry in the sun.

In Tahiti and in the adjacent Society Islands they prepare from this flour, a pleasant tasting, very nutritious, gelatinous cake which is like the salep [the dried and ground tubers] of Orchis morio, militaris and mascula.

In Banda and in the islands of the Moluccan archipelago, where bread from the pith of the sago tree is in fact not abundant, the Tacca flour is wrapped in cloth and covered with stones before heating or baking [umu?], a morsel of bread better than sago itself.

These vigorous people also have a medical use for the roots, in the form of a plaster, when badly hurt with a weapon, or to put on some other affliction.

Rumphius portrays a species of parasite of upright phallic form, growing from the root of the forest variety of Tacca, [a new shoot?] but this was not seen by us.

The Tahitians call the cultivated variety pia, and the forest variety e ve.

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