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# The Taro Tattler

College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, University of Hawaii  
Information Sheet for the Growers, Shippers, Processors of Chinese, Poi, Dasheen and Samoan  
Taros from Hawaii

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The College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, University of Hawaii at Manoa, is playing a catalytic-coordinative role by identifying current and potential players and markets for Hawaii-grown taros. This newsletter is to inform those with interest in this industry of the progress of this project. For the first edition, we thought a question-answer format would be the most efficient way to get information across to our readers. Note that QUALITY is stressed as the primary factor separating the best farmers from the rest. This characteristic should be not only a part of the product sold, but also of the management strategy of the business — regardless of its size!

## What is the State of Taro, Both Here and on the Mainland?

According to the Hawaii Agricultural Statistics Service (HASS) production of poi taro decreased by 20 acres in 1988. Production of Chinese taro on the other hand, increased by 40 acres in the same year. The amount of taro exported to the Mainland from Hawaii is not known. Fortyfive million pounds of fresh taro (they call it dasheen and tannia on the Mainland) was imported to the United States in 1986. Major suppliers were Dominican Republic (38 mil. lbs), Costa Rica (2.5 mil. lbs), Western Samoa (1.7 mil. lbs, which includes in-shipments to Hawaii), and Jamaica (1.3 mil. lbs), accounting for 97% of the total imports. In addition, 292 thousand pounds of dasheen leaves were imported in the same year. Given the proper marketing strategies, Hawaii could possibly supply the Mainland with some of the taro products now being imported from foreign countries.

## What is the College's Role in the Development of the Taro Industry?

The objective of this project is to help those com-

mercially involved in taro to sell more QUALITY taro and taro products than were sold in the years before. (While the project focuses primarily on commercial production and sales of taro, the home growers of taro will no doubt benefit from this work).

To accomplish this goal, this particular College program aims to collect and distribute, in a timely manner and with permission, information such as the names of all those involved in the commercial production and marketing of taro, so that more opportunities to sell taro can be realized. It is not, however, our goal to promote the product...that is the responsibility of those in the industry. This thought is supported by the very successful owner of the L.A.-based company, Frieda's Finest, Frieda Caplan, the lady who introduced Kiwi fruit to the U.S. 20 years ago. Frieda who repacked and sold millions of dollars of fruit and vegetables (including dasheen) last year says, "[t]here isn't any free lunch. The grower pays for the market promotional materials... We develop an understanding with a grower or group of small growers of the same crop to equally share in the cost of developing the market (*Avocado Grower*, pg. 24-25, 1985)."

Another objective of this project is to physically bring together producers, processors and marketers so that they can utilize the information gathered by this project.

## What's Happened So Far On The Taro Project?

While discussions on the need for work in the marketing area have gone on since at least the last GACC Industry Analysis of 1986, the project began in earnest with the hiring of Research Associate, Jim Hollyer, half time, in January of this year. To date the following tasks have been accomplished:

- 1) In individual and small-group meetings, talked to many local taro growers, shippers, processors and industry associations about their marketing (and production) needs and ideas. Further, six L.A.

and San Francisco buyers were interviewed concerning marketing potential and problems for Hawaii's taros. MORE interviews will be taking place as additional ground work is completed...so don't think we have forgotten you!

2) Collected the names and address of growers, shippers, processors both here and on the Mainland, thus providing the names to be put in #3 below.

3) From the discussions with those involved with taro, an outline for a marketing handbook, which will be out around August 1989, has been prepared and the format is in final review. It is tentatively going to contain:

- names, address, phone and Fax numbers, and types of taros grown by growers
- names, address, phone and Fax numbers, size and taro type preferences for shippers and processors
- drawings and scientific names of types of taro
- shipping company information in and out of Hawaii, ship, truck and air, phone number, schedules
- handling procedures at shipper and in store, cooler life, shelf life, temperatures
- nutritional aspects of taro types and products where available
- section on farmers rights and legislation:
  - the PACA act/law
  - Hawaii Direct Marketing License
- advice on business practices, e.g. get delivery receipt which has set price on it
- section on how to decide on whether to play the market or go with a contract
- preparation and cooking ideas, e.g. serving ideas-what food to serve with what taro products
- seasonality, any change in quality of product
- availability
- origin of crops
- size availability
- merchandising ideas—packaging, display
- present and possible markets, i.e. the Chinese in San Francisco

4) A press release has been submitted to all local newspapers about #3 asking that those commercial growers, processors, etc., contact the taro project by mail so that their names are included in a "survey" to be used to collect accurate information. The "survey" to be discussed in more detail below.

5) Along with colleagues Kevin Yokoyama, Kulavit Wanitrapha, and Stuart Nakamoto, have

drafted a *Taro Fact Sheet*, to provide up-to-date information for you and your clients on many aspects of taro, including demand and supply information for various taro products and the numbers of Market News Information Services in key areas of the Mainland. This fact sheet also outlines the competition's market and marketing techniques on the Mainland, for instance, the fact that taro corms are coming from Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Brazil, etc., and they are often graded and are in boxes. This sheet will be available around June 1989.

6) Plans have been established for the writing of a production handbook for all of our Hawaii commercial taro varieties.

7) A research project proposal dealing with the starch-sugar and chipping problems is under review.

### **How Does the Industry Achieve the Goal of Selling More Taro?**

While Hawaii taro has a fairly loyal following both here and the Mainland, (there was some of the competition's dasheen in the store the other day however), because it is said to have a better taste and appearance, the shelf-life is longer, and because of the Hawaii name recognition, the fact is that Hawaii taro farmers are going to have to work hard to get and maintain their market share...So, with this in mind how does the industry sell more taro? This question has been asked of lots of people and the following list is a result of these discussions:

- Don't jeopardize your market or the market of the other people in Hawaii, by selling short bags or an inferior product—Frieda Caplan allows no more than 3% shrinkage from any cause. Provide a quality product (harvested, cleaned/dried, packed and shipped well before it could ever be considered old or bad) all the time and evenly distributed in quantity throughout the year. If a bad taro does slip through the farmer must bear the burden and compensate immediately or risk the loss of a customer, because that taro could just have caused your Mainland supplier to lose their (your final) customer. Would you ever consider paying for a sack of potatoes or rice that was a bad? Would you ever buy from that store again? Remember it is *your* taro from the time you plant it until the time it is eaten -- you might want to check and see how your grocer is handling your product.
- Sign a marketing agreement that satisfies the needs of both the buyer and seller — have your association organize this for you with the help of an

unbiased and skilled mediator. By doing this it will assure a consistent supply of taro with less risk to both parties.

- Grade fresh taro products (Hawaii Dasheen is already graded) and set prices accordingly. To start the ball rolling on this the industry (preferably, growers, shippers and processors) should meet with the Commodities Division of the Hawaii Department of Agriculture. Call Sam Camp at 548-7145 for more details.

- Design and use more effective packaging and labeling for products. This may include providing nutritional information on bags and jars of poi, or creating a new brand-label for QUALITY Hawaii export taro products. Including these labels on all corms and leaves is recommended by those who are successful in the business. The name recognition and success of Dole and Chiquita is just one example of where people have spent money to make money.

- Get the people in your association to create an image and label of QUALITY and use it as a marketing tool— this is what Sunkist (a group of growers) does.

- Send a free bag of taro or some taro leaves to a new Mainland buyer. Include information on availability, handling, etc. After all, how did you get hooked on taro, someone probably *gave* you some. Most of this product information you'll be able to get from the marketing handbook once it comes out. (For foods such as poi, add freshness dating and resealing and preservation instructions).

- Give away processed product samples. For instance, a chipper could give away small packages of chips that has ordering information on the package, be it your address or the address of your distributor on the Mainland or elsewhere. Send them to the airlines, cruise ships, hotels, travel and food magazine writers, etc. but make sure you follow up with a phone call to see if they like it. In order that everyone shares in the burden as well as the success, chippers should arrange to receive free taro from growers — you can check with your accountant on the tax implications of this. Remember, you have to pay to play.

- Work with a shipper who you like and who has a reputable payment record (call the Better Business Bureau for information) and **STAY WITH HIM!** This was the biggest complaint of the Mainland buyers because they can not plan for the future if the supply is uncertain — **THE SUPPLY FROM SOUTH AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN IS ALMOST ALWAYS CERTAIN!** Check with your shipper to set up a growing schedule that will suit both of your needs — call your extension agent for help. **THINK LONG TERM!**

- Shippers, take time to go out and see the farmers

that are producing the product that you make your living on — there is a lot to learn and more and better communication often means more money for both of you. Shippers must also stand by their growers and give them a fair price at all times — its a two way process, but one that when working well, provides financial security of both parties.

- The agricultural statistics need to be better defined for dasheen, Chinese and poi taros. For instance, production defined across months by variety. In doing this it will reduce some of the uncertainty surrounding the market. Industry people will need to get together and talk to the Department of Agriculture to see what can be done. Remember, the data can be good only if farmers provide good data to the DOA.

### What are Some of the Many Unresolved Issues and Upcoming Work?

Commitment to this project is key to achieving the objective of expanding the industry. Are we moving in a useful and productive direction? As an indicator (or vote of confidence) of the industry's commitment to this project would the processing companies on behalf of their suppliers, and the associations on behalf of their members, consider making a financial commitment to share in the costs of this project?

To gather the information for the Marketing Handbook we will be sending out a survey-type of form to all identified growers, shippers and processors in May 1989. Please fill out all areas that are relevant to you and return it within the week. **THERE WILL BE ONLY ONE MAIL OUT AND NO REMINDER!**

Did you know that there are machines that can aid in the production and processing of taro? With the help of the extension agents and other members of the industry, we will be getting the machinery situation straightened out in the next few weeks and get back to you at that time.

"Goal" the pre-emergent herbicide that everyone is waiting for is still in the review process in Washington. We should have some word by late this year. In the mean time a reminder: no herbicides, pesticides or insecticides are cleared for use on taro.

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**Specific Plan of Work for the Next Three Months**

- Send out surveys to all interested in the commercial taro industry. Tabulate information and format Marketing Handbook.
- Gather more market data on the competition's product, packaging and price structure.
- Assemble relevant information on taro farm mechanization.
- Collect information on producer contracts that have worked.

**For more information write:**

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