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## Traditional Management and Use of Yams (*Dioscorea* spp.) in Wolayita, Southern Ethiopia

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### Abstract

Yams (*Dioscorea* spp.) are widely distributed throughout the tropics and sub-tropics. They are cultivated by subsistence farmers in the southern, south-western and western parts of Ethiopia across a range of agro-ecologies. Some species are also found in the wild and often collected for food in various localities. Nevertheless, researchers and policy makers have largely neglected yams and no attempt was made to systematically study their significance in the farming system and identify existing potential for crop improvement.

As part of an ongoing study to characterise diversity in yams, this survey was conducted in Wolayita zone, southern Ethiopia, to investigate the existing yam production system and farmers' perceptions and management of the crop. The study area was stratified according to geographic distance and altitude to cover the geographic range of yams. A household survey was conducted using structured and semi-structured questionnaire and 320 households were interviewed during the 2003/2004-cropping season. Data was collected on production methods, current trends, production constraints, and uses.

Results indicate that yam is highly valued by Wolayita farmers and managed accordingly to meet their needs. Planting is mainly in October, at the onset of the dry season and making use of soil moisture reserves from the preceding rains. Early maturing cultivars are ready for first harvesting from May and fill seasonal gaps in food supply. The main production constraints are small landholding, laboriousness of the production system, scarcity of staking materials, and shortage of seed tubers for planting. Nonetheless, yam is establishing itself as an important cash crop in most localities. More importantly, it is the preferred food for honoured guests and served during the main traditional celebration (*Meskel*) that coincides with the peak of harvesting, fetching high prices on markets.

The study showed the persistent farmers' interest in producing and utilising yams despite lack of support in any form. There exists a potential to improve the crop through a good understanding of how farmers manage and use diversity, and proper characterisation and evaluation of the existing germplasm. This will undoubtedly increase the role of yams in addressing food security both at household and national level.

**Keywords:** *Dioscorea* spp., traditional management, utilisation, yam