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“Bridging the gap between increasing knowledge and decreasing resources”

## Aroids: Orphans in the Global Food System

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### Abstract

The aroid plant family currently comprises of more than 120 genera and about 3,750 species of which many are used as food, medicine, animal fodder, ornamental plants, and cut flowers. Several genera, such as *Anthurium*, *Calla* and *Spathiphyllum*, are among the world's most popular ornamentals, but the five most important cultivated aroid genera are species of: Elephant ear (L. *Alocasia*); elephant foot yam (L. *Amorphophallus*); Swamp taro (L. *Cyrtosperma*); Taro (L. *Colocasia*) and Tannia (L. *Xanthosoma*). Taro is the world's oldest cultivated food plant, and together with tannia the most widely distributed and consumed aroid. All plant parts of aroids are eaten. The roots and tubers are rich in carbohydrates and the leaves and stalks are an important source of protein, vitamins and folic acid.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) roughly estimates that around half a billion people in the (sub)tropics and developing world are involved in aroid cultivation, consumption, and trade. Apart from a staple in the diets of numerous ethnicities in and from Asia, Polynesia, Africa and Latin America, aroids are important economic crops with high cultural and ceremonial value. Because the cultivation and consumption of aroids is foremost restricted to populations in and from sub-tropical regions and the developing world, aroids are little known outside of non-western food systems. Still, and as a result of globalisation, urbanisation, transnational trade, and the (global) South to North migration, aroids are increasingly assuming importance and meanwhile widely available in densely populated urban areas throughout the world. Meanwhile concerns about population growth, land use, agricultural biodiversity, small-scale farmers, sustainability, and food security encompass every area of the world. Despite aroids already being widely available in the gardens and diets of the world's most vulnerable people, schemes to address these issues hardly incorporate the nutrient richness of aroids. The paper will present an overview of traditional uses of aroids in cuisines and cultures and will stress the importance of incorporating current uses in strategies to alleviate hunger and poverty.

**Keywords:** Aroids, food security, global food system, root and tuber crops, significance, vegetables