

FARMER TO FARMER - SHARING ORGANIC PRACTICES

GROWING NIUEAN YAMS

Niue is the Rock of Polynesia owing to its rocky terrain. It is amazing to see plants grow out of and amongst the rocks. The soil is shallow with low nutrient content and a poor structure.

Yet farmers have tilled this land for generations to feed their families and in the past few decades, earn an income. They have adapted special skills to conquer the rock-filled landscape. The next generation receive this knowledge, through a mentorship system practiced when families farm together. The younger farmer learns from his elders. Applying this farming knowledge is important especially when planting traditional crops like yams the organic way.

There are over 20 varieties of yam with harvests averaging ten months. Their planting methods are the same.

Step 1

Prepare planting material. Cut up yam into quarters big enough for planting.



Step 2

Rub up natural fungicide (wood ash) onto exposed inner flesh of yam. The new yam crop will sprout off the surface of the yam skin. Safely transfer planting materials to planting site in a basket.



Step 3



To choose a good spot, stamp your feet on the ground where you intend to dig the yam hole. A hollow thud indicates the soil is deep enough. A compact sound would indicate the ground is rocky and soil layers are shallow, unsuitable for planting crops like yams.

Step 4



Dig the hole for the yam. An average yam hole is about one foot deep. The hole is dug as a circle and wide enough to allow enough space for yams to grow. The deeper the hole, the bigger the yam.

Step 5



Center

Yam into the side of the hole, not in the centre

Plant one or two pieces of yam on the sides (walls) of the hole, not in the centre. Up to four new yams can grow from the skin of the planting material. A new yam finds its way into the deep spot in the centre of the hole and grow down deep into the soil. Cover the yam and the hole with soil. Create a small mound.

Step 6

Bless the yam. Encourage its growth with positive words like 'I want you to be as long as my legs. Niuean's believe plants are just like human being that need love and attention. Like to bless the banana tree, 'grow well and grow big so you can bear 15 to 20 hands. Blessings though must be accompanied with proper maintenance and care for crops.

Step 7

Cover the yams with branches to keep animals and poultry away.



10 Months Later

It is harvest time. Dig up the yams with your hands or a spade. Be careful not to dig into the yam flesh.



Note: Niuean farmers hold a belief the presence of women experiencing their menstrual cycle or even farmers returning from sea and immediately visiting the farm has a negative effect on yam growth. The yam leaves turn brown, and the yams rot in the ground.

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