

*Dioscorea villosa*

[Synonyms : *Dioscorea hirticaulis*, *Dioscorea paniculata*, *Dioscorea quaternata*, *Dioscorea villosa* var. *hirticaulis*]

**WILD YAM** is a twining, climbing vine. Native to the south-eastern United States it has small, greenish-yellow flowers.

It is also known as Atlantic yam, *Batata silvestre* (Spanish), China root, Colic root, Devil's bones, *Dioscorea*, Fourleaf yam, *Jamssi* (Finnish), *Mekishiko yama imo* (Japanese), *Ñame silvestre* (Spanish), Rheumatism root, *Wilder Yam* (German), *Wilde Yamswurzel* (German), *Wilde yam wurzel*, Yuma, and *Zottige Yamswurzel* (German).

Warning – unprocessed tubers are poisonous and can cause internal and external irritation. Wild yam's roots have been mistaken for those of the poisonous Climbing lily (*Gloriosa superba*).

*Villosa* is derived from Latin *villosus* (shaggy, hairy) meaning 'softly hairy or shaggy haired'. The roots provided a source of medicine for the North American Meskwaki Indian tribe who used it especially to ease the pain of childbirth.

For centuries in China the yam, with soya bean (*Glycine max*), has formed part of the staple diet for country peasants. One authority tells how during the Han dynasty under the rule of Emperor Ch'eng (32-7 BC) an irrigation dam burst in Honan and caused serious disruption to farming and crop failure and local people are said to have sung

It was Chai Tzu-wei who destroyed our dam,

Now all we have for food is soy beans and yam.

Yam festivals are traditional in Papua New Guinea. For these the men grow the yams secretly and the tubers can reach 6 feet in length. They are carved with faces and after the festival ceremonies (during which prize yams are exchanged and represent a token of the owner's own standing in the community) they are given as presents to the women.

The foregoing well indicates the importance of yam to many civilizations as a staple source of food.

Medicinally, the dried root of various species was originally used to treat wind, and nausea during pregnancy. It has also been employed as a remedy for rheumatism (the tubers are an important source of cortisone) and for some period problems. But probably its biggest contribution has come during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in the field of contraception.

The basis for modern birth control, the use of oral contraceptives, owes its existence to one of the initially rare components (diosgenin) found in some yam species. This was identified in the early 1940s by an American organic chemist, Russell E. Marker (1902-1995) and, despite the subsequent emergence of other sources (mainly synthetic) during the 1980s, has meant that yams can provide a significant proportion of the ingredients needed to make steroidal drugs as a whole, particularly in developing countries. The tubers are collected and processed for drugs in India, China and Africa. In some countries they are such a fundamental part of the economy now that they are only permitted to be grown commercially under licence.