

Cassava—*Manihot esculenta* Crantz¹

James M. Stephens²

Cassava is also known as manioc, manihot, yucca, mandioca, sweet potato tree, and tapioca plant. It is an important food crop in the tropics where it is grown for its starchy, tuberous roots.

Cassava has been grown in Florida for many years. Around 1895, it was grown to such an extent that a few small starch factories were started to process the crop. Also, it became a common item in vegetable gardens all over Florida. While not as important a commercial crop as it once was, about 800 acres were grown in Dade County for the fresh market in 1984. Only a relatively few gardeners now include it in their home gardens.

Description

Cassava is a shrubby perennial that grows to a height of 6–8 feet. It has smooth erect stems and resembles the cannabis plant in appearance. The large compound, dark green, reddish veined leaves are palmately divided into about seven leaflets. The stems contain a soft white pith and have nodes from which new plants are obtained.

Use

The roots, which are the most valuable portions of the plant, grow in clusters of 4 to 8 at the stem base. Roots are from 1 to 4 inches in diameter and from 8 to 15 inches long, although roots up to 3 feet long are found. The pure white interior is firmer than potatoes and has a very high starch content. The roots are covered with a thin reddish brown fibrous bark that is removed by scraping and peeling. The

bark is reported to contain toxic hydrocyanic (prussic) acid, which must be removed by washing, scraping and heating.

Two types of cassava recognized are bitter and sweet. The sweet-type roots contain only a small amount of the acid and are boiled and used as a vegetable along with the young leaves. The roots are also used for animal feed and the starch is used for glue, laundry starch, and tapioca pudding. Leaves are not eaten raw because of the poisonous substances.



Figure 1. Cassava roots
Credits: James M. Stephens

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Culture

Cassava needs 8 to 11 frost-free months to produce usable roots. It requires about the same soil and fertilizer as for sweet potatoes. Cassava is propagated by planting short 10-inch sections of the stem 2 to 4 inches deep at 4-foot intervals on 4-foot wide rows. The roots are dug or pulled and used soon after harvest since they deteriorate rapidly.