

Name: _____

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A Different Kind of U-Tuber

Lesson 1. 'Uala

He 'uala ka 'ai ho'ōla koke I ka wī

The sweet potato is the food that ends famine quickly

(‘Ōlelo No’eau No. 946)

'Uala is a general term for any kind of sweet potato. It was the second most cultivated food in old Hawai'i, with kalo being the first. It is known as a canoe plant, as it was brought by the first Polynesian settlers who arrived by canoe in Hawai'i. 'Uala planters used many names and descriptors for the different varieties of 'uala, the shape of the leaves, the color of the leaves and vines, and the type of tuber produced by the plant.

There are several benefits to planting 'uala as opposed to kalo, however kalo is usually the preferred mea'ai (food). 'Uala can be grown in less favorable sun and soil conditions than kalo. Clay-like soils are the only soils that 'uala struggles to thrive in. 'Uala also grows very quickly. It takes 3-6 months to produce food, whereas kalo can take between 9-18 months. 'Uala also takes less effort to plant and maintain.

Most people are familiar with eating the tubers, which are the part typically sold in stores. The nutrients found in 'uala tubers such as Vitamin A, calcium, and phosphorus are found near the skin, so they were typically consumed with the skin still on. Sometimes the tubers were masked into 'uala ho'omalamala which had a similar texture to poi. This mixture could also be combined with water and fermented, to create 'uala 'awa'awa or sweet potato beer. The leaves and stems could also be eaten, so nothing was wasted.

'Uala had many uses in addition to being a nutritious food source for people. The leaves, stem, and sap were used to treat many different ailments. Some varieties could be used to treat and sometimes cure early forms of asthma. It could also be used as a laxative or made into a sore throat tonic. Lawai'a (fishermen) used a specific variety of 'uala as bait when catching 'opelu. The dried 'uala leaves and vines were used as padding, when making lau hala or makaloa mats.

The 'ōlelo no'eau above describes 'uala as "the food that ends famine quickly". Why do you think 'uala is described this way? Use information from the passage to support your claim.