

Anyone Growing Oca?

by Al Chomica



No, not Okra, but Oca or *Oxalis tuberosa*. This is a perennial, herbaceous plant that overwinters as underground stem tubers. It is also a new food for us in North America that has been grown in New Zealand since 1860 and is marketed as New Zealand Yams. But they are not yams at all. They are also referred to as one of the “Lost Foods of the Incas” because they were originally cultivated in ancient Peru.

Oca is a starchy tuber with great crunch and has a mildly citrus-like flavour. They can be roasted, boiled or even deep-fried like French Fries (my favourite). It is predicted by many growers that this plant will replace potatoes on our dinner plates within 20 years. One tuber the size of your finger will grow up to three pounds of tubers by the end of autumn. If one can find them, they sell for \$8 a pound. This crop has decent returns and tubers are now being sold in catalogues by at least one nursery in Canada.

I obtained one small, dried-up tuber at Seedy Saturday two years ago. The tuber grew well and turned into over 200 tubers after year one. We planted 100 of those tubers in March of 2016 with the potential to turn into 300 pounds of tasty tubers that could be worth as much as \$2400 – but alas! The raccoons discovered them one day and essentially roto-tilled the entire patch, digging up 99 of them! Ugh! Other growers have had their crops completely decimated by rats, voles and black squirrels too so Oca tubers are a highly sought-after food. I have now solved this problem by covering the top of the tuber bed with chicken wire until year end. The challenge to growing this crop is the severe competition from garden varmints.



They have beautiful foliage that looks like clover but with a unique twist. The three heart-shaped leaves fold up together at night as if they were praying. Have you ever tried to place three pages together equally? I challenge you to try this. Cut out three hearts joined together at

the center like the leaves. Then try to fold them together so that each half of one leaf is covered by a half of the other leaf. The goal is to see if you are as good of an engineer as a leaf. It is an amazing yet unusual sight to see how the plant has figured this out.

Growing these plants has been an eye-opener because they grow differently from most other plants. During planting, one plants a tuber a foot apart and lets the plant go for the rest of the summer. The plants appear to do well with morning sun and afternoon shade. They grow slowly all summer until September 21 when a daylight-sensitive switch gets turned on and they start to grow. If you were to dig around the plant, you would be disappointed to find the plant has not produced a single tuber.

They start forming tubers when everything else is moving into winter dormancy. The leaves and stems start to sprawl and take over the garden. When they grow as if they got a shot of nitrogen they are just starting to form those tasty tubers underground. Apparently hilling them now, like potatoes, will also increase yields. From what I learned growing them last year, this is the time to ensure the leaves don't get killed by November frosts by installing something like floating row covers. My belief is that the longer one saves the leaves, the bigger the tubers will get over the next month. When the stems and leaves have been killed by frost and turned to mush, the tubers are ready.

While conducting a garden tour in early November I mentioned that the tubers will soon start to form. I poked my finger in the ground to discover the first tubers were just forming. It is a race against the frost, the rodents and the raccoons to see who gets them first and how big they will get...

