

## Tubers and tubers, but not potato

Carbohydrate-rich energy-packed tubers of potato, yam, taro are all very popular among us. They have also grown in tonnes around the globe. But, even in the age of globalized food production, many local tubers are farmed and consumed locally, perhaps for centuries. *Flemingia vestita* of the family Fabaceae, locally known as *Sohphlang*, is a nitrogen-fixing perennial herb having a prostrate but weak stem. The juicy tuber and its



smooth cream-colored flesh has a sweet and nutty flavor that make it a highly palatable vegetable among the Garo, Khasi, and Jaintia tribes of Meghalaya. The plant is highly branched with hairy rhizomes and the roots are tuberous. With a wide distribution range, it can be found growing as a wild herb along the mountain slopes of the Himalayas, in south-west provinces of China, Nepal, the Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya in northeast India, and further extending to Laos, Philippines and Vietnam. The root is edible in many Asian tribal communities. The unique tubers are made into curries or many other local delicacies. Along with other crops, it is even formally grown in the shifting fields of the hilly terrain for local consumption. In recent years, its demand has increased manifold, hence cultivated as a cash crop, and is regularly available in the local markets at a higher price because of its higher nutritional and medicinal value, especially for its high phosphorus and proteins and its traditional use as an anthelmintic.

*Sohphlang* is generally propagated vegetatively through its small tubers which are sown in March and harvested in October. After harvest, the healthy tubers are carefully selected as seed for next sowing and stored underground. *Sohphlang* is planted in virgin soil for one year, but after that the place is either left fallow or cultivated for other crops for next five or more years before replanting. Although potatoes were grown in the hills along with other tubers and served as a source of easy carbohydrate, the demand for *Sohphlang* has not been decimated. But it is relished locally in various forms and widely appreciated for its flavor, nutrients, and medicinal properties. The fact turns out to be crucial today when talked over in light of a diverse and nutritious diet with local available resources. Importantly, it is also a matter of taste that drives our food culture.

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