

GROUNDNUT

Apios americana Medik.

Plant Symbol = APAM

Contributed By: USDA NRCS National Plant Data Center

Alternative Names

Groundnut, wild potato, Indian potato, wild sweet potato, American potato bean, wild bean, ground bean, hopniss, Dakota peas, sea vines, pea vines, pomme de terre, patates en chapelet, American potato bean

Uses

Ethnobotanic:

According to Kelly Kindscher (1987),

“groundnut is a common native food plant of temperate, eastern North America. Its distribution reaches west to the wet margins of prairies, where it was once used extensively by the Native Americans.”

Groundnut was a source of food among the Omaha, Dakota, Santee Sioux, Cheyenne, Osage, Pawnee, and Hidatsa (Gilmore 1913, Grinnell 1962, Matthews 1961, Wilson 1987). Groundnut was excavated from four Ozark bluff-dweller sites in Arkansas. The Ozark peoples are regarded as pre-Columbian (Beardsley 1939). Groundnuts “roots” were dug in the winter. The tubers were gathered all year but were best when harvested from late Fall through early spring. They were eaten raw, cooked, or dried and ground for flour. Some of the “roots” were boiled, peeled, and dried for storage. The seeds are cooked and eaten like peas in summer.

Groundnut was also an important food of New England colonists (Hedrick 1919). Once the colonists discovered the groundnut, they enacted a town law to prevent Indians from digging groundnut on English land. Groundnut tubers are a good source



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of carbohydrates and contain between 13 and 17 percent protein by dry weight, or about three times more than potatoes or any other widely used vegetable root (Yanovsky and Kingsbury 1938, Watt and Merrill 1963).

Horticultural: This plant is an attractive ornamental.

Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant’s current status, such as, state noxious status, and wetland indicator values.

Description

General: Legume Family (Fabaceae). Groundnut (*Apios americana*) is a perennial herb from slender rhizomes with tuberous thickenings 1.3-4 cm (0.5-1.6 in) thick, and stems twining or climbing over other plants. The leaves are alternate, pinnately, egg-shaped, 2-10 cm (3/4-4 in) long, 1.8-7 cm (0.7-2.7 in) wide, and sometimes hairy. The flowers are in rounded clusters among leaves. Groundnut blooms from July to October. The flowers have 5 parts, the upper one round, white and reddish brown, the 2 side wings curved down and brown-purple, the lower 2 petals sickle-shaped and brownish red. The fruits are dry, straight or slightly curved, narrow, and 5-10 mm (3/16-3/8 in) long. The fleshy legume fruits are 6-12 mm (0.2-.5 in) in diameter and indehiscent (the fruit coils back after opening), usually with 1 seed. The seeds are oblong or square, dark brown, with wrinkled surfaces.

Distribution

For current distribution, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site. Groundnut is distributed through the great prairie from Quebec to Minnesota, North Dakota, south to north central Colorado, Florida, and Texas.

Establishment

Adaptation: Groundnut grows in wet meadows, low thickets, banks of streams and ponds, sloughs, moist prairie ravines, and moist soil in woodlands.

Propagation from Cuttings: Plant tubers two to three inches deep in the early spring (Kindscher 1992). After shoots establishment, mulch to stop competition from weeds and grass. Provide the young shoots with a traverse or other objectives upon which to climb. After one year of growth, several

one inch-thick tubers can be harvested from each plant. Because of their vining nature, groundnut would be hard to grow on a field scale, and their annual yield appears to be quite low in comparison to other crops. Groundnut is difficult to cultivate mechanically, because each tuber can sprout and grow in the spring, filling in spaces between rows.

Management

Under development.

Cultivars, Improved and Selected Materials (and area of origin)

APAM is available from native plant nurseries within its range.

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Prepared By

Michelle Stevens

Formerly USDA, NRCS, National Plant Data Center

Species Coordinator

M. Kat Anderson

USDA, NRCS, National Plant Data Center

c/o Plant Science Department, University of

California, Davis, California

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