



# the **green thumb**

Journal and Gardening Tips from the  
National Tropical Botanical Garden



# Spring Vegetables

Spring in the northern hemisphere is that rare time of year when we can plant the same vegetables in both Hawai'i and the continental U.S.. During this season, I love to plant salad veggies: lettuces, radishes, arugula, carrots, sugar snap peas, cucumbers, and cherry tomatoes. The biggest challenge is getting the timing right so that you can enjoy the whole salad at once, rather than spread over half the year! While Mother Nature ultimately has the last word on the timing of your harvests, with a little planning you can enjoy a full salad plate all summer long.

Begin by planting carrots and tomatoes, as they take the longest: 65-100 days to harvest. Start your first seeds just before the last frost of spring by planting your tomatoes indoors in small pots and your first batch of carrot seed in a deep planter that can be moved outside once temperatures allow. Later, carrots can be sown directly into the ground every two to three weeks until mid-summer. Indeterminate (vining) cherry tomato plants will produce for many weeks, so a second planting in early summer should keep you well-stocked.

About two weeks after your first planting, start head lettuces, cucumbers, and sugar snap peas which take between 55-75 days to harvest. Pick cucumbers and peas as soon as they're ripe to keep your vines productive longer. Two weeks later, plant arugula and leaf lettuces (approximately 40 days to harvest), and finally, about ten days after that, you can plant radishes (roughly 30 days to harvest). Keep planting lettuces and radishes every two weeks to keep your salad bowl brimming. As the weather warms, give your lettuce more shade, more water, and pick your crop younger to keep them from growing bitter. With these simple steps, you can enjoy a delicious, bountiful harvest of home grown vegetables throughout the spring and summer.

—South Shore Nursery Manager, Rhian Campbell

# notes





—Senior Horticulturist, The Kampong, Benoit Jonckheere



# Dormant Plants

Deciduous plants lose their leaves and go physiologically “dormant” when environmental conditions are not favorable for optimal growth, typically triggered by a decrease of temperatures and photoperiod for temperate climate plants and drought conditions for tropical climate plants.

Dormancy allows the plant to conserve resources during times of stress and provides benefits for the gardener as well. Leaf litter brings nutrients from deep in the ground to the soil surface, increasing organic matter and feeding soil invertebrates and microorganisms (this is assuming you don't rake the leaves away!). Dormant plants also provide a respite from foliar disease and pest pressure. In addition, fallen litter provides winter shelter for many beneficial insects such as native bees. Note: remove any diseased or pest-laden litter to minimize the potential spread to new growth.

Those new to gardening may have a difficult time distinguishing dormant plants from dead or dying plants. Here are a few things to look for:

- Dormant plants typically have pliable stems, if you gently bend a stem and it breaks or is shriveled or mushy it is likely dead.
- Using your fingernail, carefully scratch the stem to expose the cambium layer (the vascular system of a plant, directly under the stem surface), live plants will be slightly green.
- If the plant loses its leaves outside of its typical dormancy period it is likely due to a biotic or an abiotic disorder.

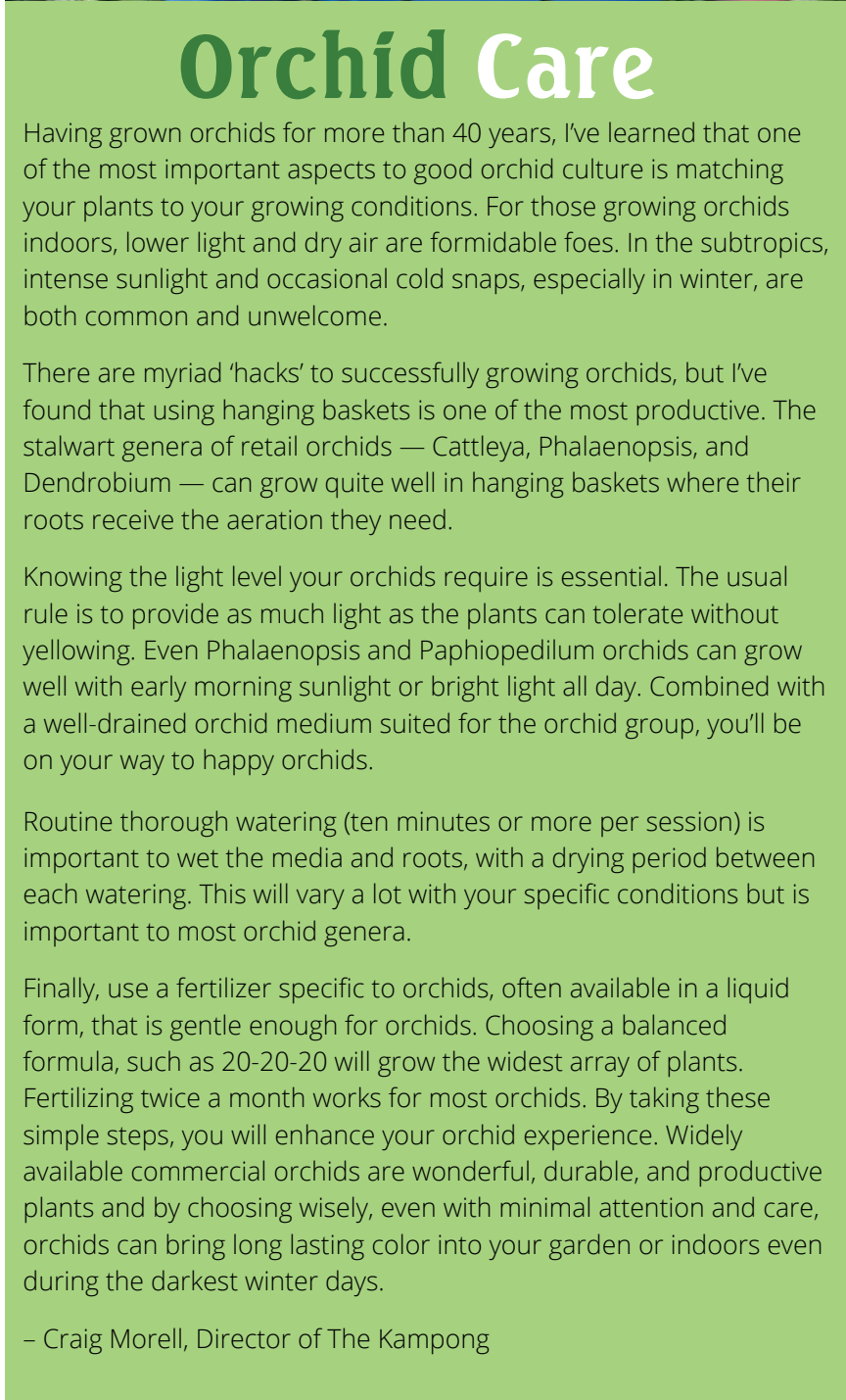
## What to do with dormant plants:

- Reduce watering. Dormant plants do not have leaves to transpire and therefore require much less water. Overwatering can lead to root rot and plant mortality.
- For some plants, such as stone fruit trees, the ideal time to prune is during the dormancy period (wait until after the last chance of frost).
- Apply a layer of organic mulch around plants.

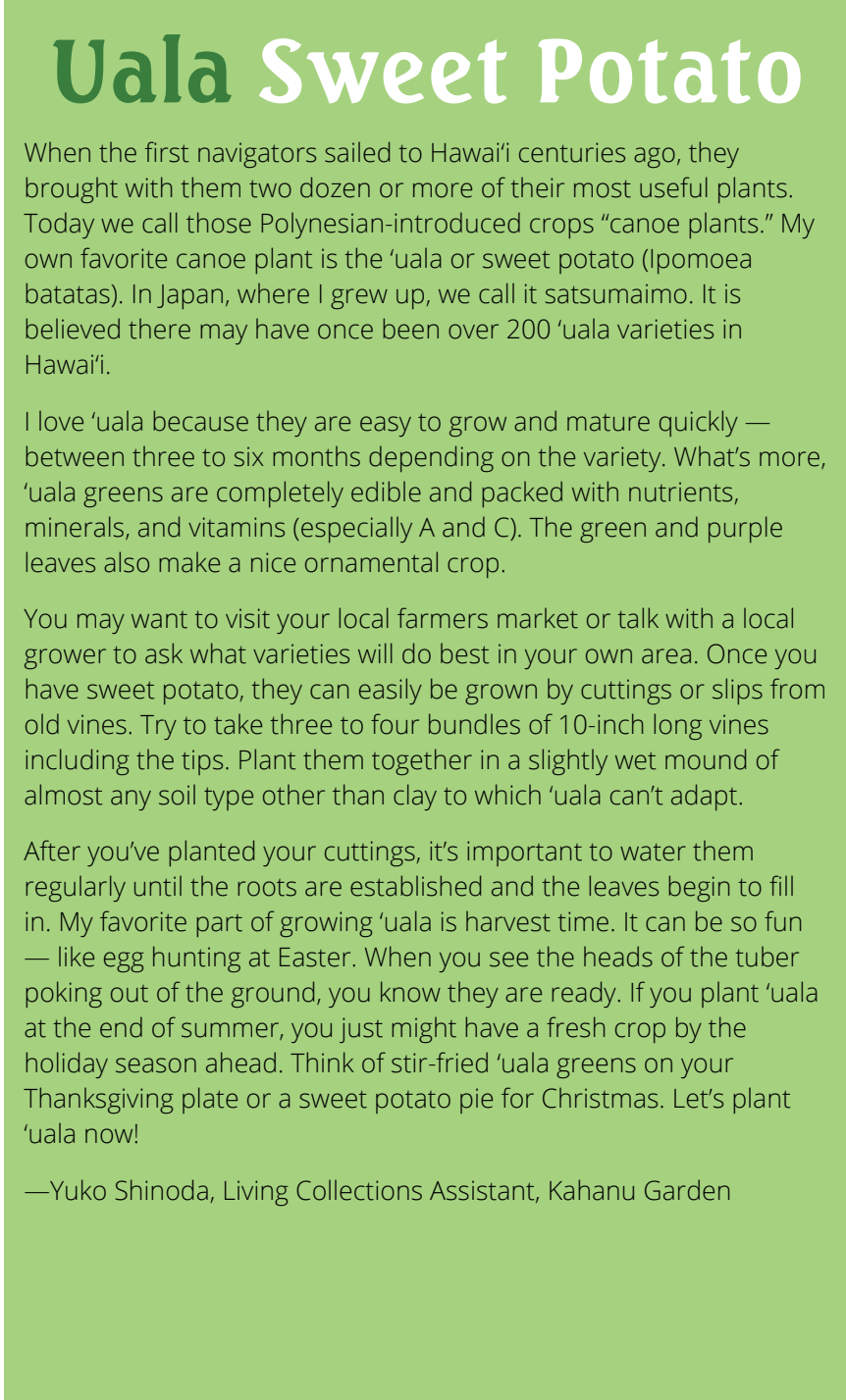
—Alex Lehman, Horticulture Manager, South Shore Gardens

## notes

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# Uala Sweet Potato

When the first navigators sailed to Hawai'i centuries ago, they brought with them two dozen or more of their most useful plants. Today we call those Polynesian-introduced crops "canoe plants." My own favorite canoe plant is the 'uala or sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*). In Japan, where I grew up, we call it satsumaimo. It is believed there may have once been over 200 'uala varieties in Hawai'i.

I love 'uala because they are easy to grow and mature quickly — between three to six months depending on the variety. What's more, 'uala greens are completely edible and packed with nutrients, minerals, and vitamins (especially A and C). The green and purple leaves also make a nice ornamental crop.

You may want to visit your local farmers market or talk with a local grower to ask what varieties will do best in your own area. Once you have sweet potato, they can easily be grown by cuttings or slips from old vines. Try to take three to four bundles of 10-inch long vines including the tips. Plant them together in a slightly wet mound of almost any soil type other than clay to which 'uala can't adapt.

After you've planted your cuttings, it's important to water them regularly until the roots are established and the leaves begin to fill in. My favorite part of growing 'uala is harvest time. It can be so fun — like egg hunting at Easter. When you see the heads of the tuber poking out of the ground, you know they are ready. If you plant 'uala at the end of summer, you just might have a fresh crop by the holiday season ahead. Think of stir-fried 'uala greens on your Thanksgiving plate or a sweet potato pie for Christmas. Let's plant 'uala now!

—Yuko Shinoda, Living Collections Assistant, Kahanu Garden

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