

Did Maori grow potatoes (*Solanum tuberosum*) prior to their introduction to New Zealand by Europeans in the late 18th century. (Oral Presentation)

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Introduction

It is generally accepted that potatoes (*Solanum tuberosum*) were first introduced to New Zealand in the late 18th century by early European explorers. The indigenous Maori were quick to recognise the advantages that these new introductions had over their traditional food crops including the kumara. (sweet potato *Ipomoea batatas*.) This paper examines reports that Maori were in possession of potatoes before the arrival of Europeans and presents evidence that this was unlikely.

Objectives

To describe traditional Maori food crops.

To examine historical and recent reports that Maori possessed *Solanum* potatoes prior to the arrival of Europeans in New Zealand.

Methods

Maori people were interviewed and their opinions on a "pre-European potato were recorded.

The economic impact of the introduction of *Solanum* potatoes on Maori society was examined.

"Traditional" Maori potatoes were collected and described.

Results

16 cultivars of "Maori potatoes" were collected, described and grown.

Stories relating to these potatoes were recorded.

Evidence for and against the presence of a "pre-European" potato was collected and analysed.

Conclusion

It was concluded that it was unlikely that Maori possessed a *Solanum* potato prior to their introduction by Europeans in the late 18th century. Precluding factors include the profound and immediate effect that potatoes introduced from Europe in the late 18th century had on Maori society, there is no scientific evidence to indicate the presence of pre-European potatoes, no evidence of the presence of potatoes was recorded by early European explorers, there are no traditional proverbs, songs or stories that refer to potatoes and potatoes were unlikely to have been grown in tropical East Polynesia from where Maori migrated to Aotearoa/New Zealand some 800 years B.P.

What is more likely is that Maori developed a range of unique potato cultivars that they selected and developed from variants of potatoes introduced by Europeans.

Keywords: Maori potatoes, riwai, taewa

Selected References

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