

Helping Pacific islanders eat more "greens"

November 3 2014, by Robyn Mills

University of Adelaide research is helping indigenous Pacific Island and Torres Strait Islander people eat more "greens" to improve their diet and help combat disease.

Led by Dr Graham Lyons, Research Fellow in the School of Agriculture, Food and Wine, the project aimed to identify leafy vegetables with high nutrition value that were easily available and would grow well in Samoa, Solomon Islands and the Torres Strait.

The next step was to raise awareness of the health benefits of leafy vegetables and encourage increased production and consumption.

"People in these regions have too high consumption of high-energy, low-nutrient foods such as a polished rice, white flour and sugar," says Dr Lyons. "This has led to high rates of metabolic diseases – obesity, diabetes, heart disease and certain cancers. We wanted to help them make easy nutritional changes to their diet that would have a significant impact in the short-term."

Funded by the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research, Dr Lyons and colleagues collected around 300 samples of commonly grown leafy vegetables and wild edible [plants](#) from the region and brought them – under permit, and following irradiation – to the Waite campus for analysis of mineral, carotenoids (vitamin a) and protein content.

The samples came from different regions and soil types so that the

analysis produced results independent of soil type, so the effect of different soils on plant mineral levels was accounted for.

"The key factors were finding plants that were high in nutritional value, easily grown in the region and, perhaps most importantly, taste good," says Dr Lyons. "Many of these [leafy greens](#) have just been overlooked as potential food plants. But adding them to the rice and other usual dishes can make a big difference in the quality of the diet."

To promote the plants and their [health benefits](#), Dr Lyons and the ACIAR team produced a series of laminated fact sheets for the top 12 leafy vegetables, outlining how to grow the plant including how to deal with pests, nutritional facts and how to use them in cooking.

"These fact sheets have been very popular in the villages," Dr Lyons says. "The anecdotal feedback is that people knew of the plants but didn't appreciate how valuable they are."

The number one "all-rounder" leafy veg is the Sweetleaf for nutritional benefit. Another one that promises to be highly beneficial is the Drumstick tree, highly nutritious with additional medicinal benefits and very hardy – suitable for growing throughout the tropics, even under drier conditions and poor soils. It will even grow on harsh coral atoll soils.

A new project starting next year is similarly looking for healthy and soil-improving plants for the tiny nations of Kiribati and Tuvalu.

Provided by University of Adelaide

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