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### THE ETHNOBOTANY OF THE SUPERMARKET POTATO

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The common potato (*Solanum tuberosum* ssp. *tuberosum*; where “ssp.” denotes a subspecies) is the leading vegetable crop in the United States, with the average American consuming about 130 pounds annually in fresh and processed forms combined (USDA 2011). Potatoes were first domesticated 7,000 years ago in the Andes of South America (Simpson & Ogorzaly 1995) and today is cultivated worldwide, in both developed and developing countries. According to the International Potato Center in Lima, Peru (CIP 2010), potato production in developing countries has grown from around 30 million tons in the 1960’s to 100 million tons in the 1990’s, and the growth rate and production of the potato continues to increase.

The potato plant is a member of the large genus *Solanum* (family Solanaceae), which consists of 1,000 - 2,000 species (Heywood et al. 2007) and includes many important edible crop plants, such as the tomato (*S. lycopersicum*), eggplant (*S. melongena*), and potato (mainly *S. tuberosum* ssp. *tuberosum* in the United States and Europe; mainly *S. tuberosum* ssp. *andigena*, *S. stenotomum*, *S. goniocalyx*, *S. phureja*, and various hybrid species such as *S. x juzepczukii*, and *S. x curtilobum* in the Andes of South America according to Brush et al., 1981). Although often thought of as a root crop, the

potato itself is actually a tuber, which is an underground stem. The so-called “eyes” of the potato are actually the stem’s nodes from which new growth would emerge.

On a recent March, 2012 visit to the produce isle of an area supermarket (Giant Foods at 1605 Lititz Pike, Pennsylvania, USA) I conducted an amateur inventory of the various cultivars available. I found a total of seven distinct cultivars and a variety of packaging forms. With each, common names or abbreviated cultivated varietal names and culinary uses were prominently displayed.

The main Russet variety at the store was *Solanum tuberosum* ssp. *tuberosum* ‘Russet Norkotah’, commonly referred to as norkotah, norkota, russet, or Idaho potato (Fig. 1). It is large and long with brown skin, prominent eyes, and white flesh. This cultivar was developed from the Russet cultivar group. “Russet” refers to the brown, russeted skin that is typical of potatoes in this group. At this particular supermarket, one of the ways this potato was sold was as individually packaged and it was marketed as being microwaveable. The instructions for cooking were to place it into a microwave for eight minutes and then to eat. This option stresses the convenience that this type of potato and way of cooking offers by the ease of which the consumer can cook and eat it. This potato

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**Fig. 1.** The bulk selection of *Solanum tuberosum* ssp. *tuberosum* ‘Russet Norkotah’ potatoes. Note the russet-type skin characteristic for this variety. [See this in color on the Web.]



**Fig. 2.** The bulk selection of *Solanum tuberosum* ssp. *tuberosum* ‘Norland’ potatoes. Note the small, round shape and red skin of this variety. [See this in color on the Web.]

cultivar was also available from this supermarket in bulk, where they were indicated as being a common addition to meals by baking or broiling. According to supermarket sources, the bulk Russet Norkotahs were grown in Sacramento, Pennsylvania. I could not confirm the precise growing location for the individually wrapped potatoes, although it is probable that they were USA-grown.

The red-skinned potatoes offered were *S. tuberosum* ssp. *tuberosum* ‘Norland’, commonly referred to as red-skinned or norland potatoes (Fig. 2). These potatoes are small, round, and red-skinned with white flesh. They were grown in Sacramento, Pennsylvania. At this store they were sold in bulk and indicated to be a common addition to meals by baking or broiling.

The yellow-skinned potatoes offered were *S. tuberosum* ssp. *tuberosum* ‘Yukon Gold’, commonly referred to as yellow-skinned or Yukon gold potatoes. These potatoes are small, round, and yellow-skinned with yellow flesh. These particular potatoes were grown in Idaho and were sold at this store prepackaged in bags of 5 pounds or more (Fig. 3) which boasted that these potatoes have a “rich, buttery flavor” that would be a positive addition to a meal by baking.

The white-skinned potatoes offered were *S. tuberosum* ssp. *tuberosum* ‘Norwis’, commonly called white-skinned, white, or norwis potatoes. Norwis potatoes are small, white-skinned potatoes with white flesh. Grown in Sacramento, Pennsylvania, these particular potatoes were prepackaged in bags of 5 or more pounds (Fig. 3). The package indicated that this variety would be ideal for several types of cooking, including baking, broiling or mashing.

Finally, there were three large, brown-skinned, and white-fleshed cultivars sold together in one package under the brand Blue Denim, which is produced by Masser™ Potato Farms in Sacramento, Pennsylvania (Fig. 3). These were *S. tuberosum* ssp. *tuberosum* ‘Superior’, *S. tuberosum* ssp. *tuberosum* ‘Reba’ and *S. tuberosum* ssp. *tuberosum* ‘Katahdin’. These were advertised as “bakeable” potatoes.

From the observed selection, it is clear that the potato is an important starch staple in the USA, and the diverse selection provides the consumer with numerous culinary options. The Potato Association of America (PAA 2012) provides a useful list of cultivars commonly grown in North America.



Fig. 3. The area with packaged, bulk potatoes found at the supermarket. [See this in color on the Web.]

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*Parksia* is published periodically by the James C. Parks Herbarium of The Department of Biology, Millersville University of Pennsylvania. It is dedicated to publishing short encyclopedic articles and essays containing useful information about plants. *Parksia* is available for free, on the Web at <http://herbarium.millersville.edu>. The street mailing address for the Herbarium is James C. Parks Herbarium, Department of Biology, Millersville University of Pennsylvania, 288 Roddy Science Building, 50 E Frederick St, Millersville, Pennsylvania, 17551, United States of America.

## *Contributions*

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