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Hawai'i Harvest of the Month: Pala'ai (Kabocha/Winter Squash)

Varieties & Nutritional Information

Pala'ai is the Hawaiian word that encompasses a range of squash varieties commonly grown in Hawai'i such as kabocha, kuri, butternut, and the familiar orange pumpkin. Each variety offers unique flavors and resilient growing traits that are ideal for local gardens and farms.

Nutritionally, pala'ai provides an abundance of vitamin A (from beta-carotene), fiber for digestive health, potassium for heart support, and vitamin C for immunity. Pala'ai grows as a vining plant and is used in Hawai'i as a living ground cover within diversified agriculture

systems, where its broad leaves help suppress weeds, retain soil moisture, and prevent erosion. Pala'ai is a delicious and nutritious addition to school meals and student learning.



Kabocha growing abundantly in a Hawai'i school garden!

Guide for Growing & Harvesting Pala'ai

The [Pala'ai Production Guide](#) from the Hawai'i 'Ulu Cooperative offers a detailed overview on growing, maintaining, and harvesting pala'ai in Hawai'i's diverse microclimates. The guide covers popular varieties like kabocha, moschata, and pepo, highlights their adaptability and nutritional richness, and emphasizes optimal planting practices such as amending soil with organic matter, proper spacing, and pollinator support. Practical advice is provided on irrigation, fertilization, and pest

management, including organic strategies and integrated crop rotation to reduce disease and improve yields. The resource also explains seed saving techniques, harvesting indicators, such as changes in rind color and stem texture, and storage methods that allow pala'ai to be preserved for longer periods of time.

Featured Educational Resources

Informational posters about pala'ai are now available for the classroom and cafeteria! (pictured at right)

These can be paired with simple lesson plans, free Farm to School Sampler Boxes for schools, and a short video that follows pala'ai on its journey from a Hawai'i Island farmer's pumpkin patch to a local food hub, which can all be found on the [Hawai'i Farm to School Network Resource Hub](#), "School Food & Tastings" page.

Meet Pala'ai!
(Kabocha Pumpkin or Winter Squash)

HISTORY IN HAWAII'

- Pala'ai comes from the Americas. Native Americans grow it alongside beans and corn, a combo called the Three Sisters.
- Portuguese traders brought it to Japan and the Philippines, from where plantation immigrants brought it to Hawai'i in the mid-1800s.
- Pala'ai is a **staple food crop** that has fed civilizations for millennia.

NUTRITION

- **Vitamin A** helps make your skin, eyes, and immune system super strong.
- **Beta-carotene** protects your body from inflammation and makes pala'ai orange — like carrots!

FUN FACTS

- While commonly considered a vegetable, pala'ai is **actually a fruit!**
- Farmers "co-crop" pala'ai with 'ulu (breadfruit) trees. Co-cropping is when two or more crops are planted in the same area to help each other grow. Pala'ai keeps the soil cool and moist while preventing weeds so other crops can thrive!

Sweet and savory, rich in vitamins and nutrients, good for you and the earth!

PALA'AI PREPARATION
(Kabocha Pumpkin/Winter Squash)

Hawai'i-grown pala'ai, commonly called kabocha pumpkin, is a delicious local crop that can be served as a red-orange vegetable or a starch. While handling fresh pala'ai can be difficult due to the shape and tough skin, using pre-steamed and frozen — or "recipe-ready" — pala'ai is easier to cook, safer to handle and reduces prep time.

USAGE TIPS FOR RECIPE-READY PALA'AI

1. Defrost frozen pala'ai in the refrigerator for 12-24 hours or steam for 5-10 minutes. Do not overcook!
2. Cut or chop the pala'ai into desired size.
3. If serving pala'ai as-is, follow these **reheating tips** for best results:

	MICRO-WAVE	STEAM	BOIL	BAKE	DEFROSTED 'ULU & STEMS
DEFROSTED	3-4 mins	8 mins	10 mins	15 mins	5-10 minutes of cooking
FROZEN	5-6 mins	20 mins	25 mins	25 mins	15-20 minutes of cooking
TIPS	Cover with damp paper towel for even heating	Do not stir; keep water small portion	Avoid over-boiling to retain vitamins	Wipe in half to lock in moisture	Can be served unseasoned or with seasoning salt.

4. Do not overcook recipe-ready pala'ai, so that it holds its shape and does not get too soft!

Nutrition Facts
Serving Size: 1 cup
Amount Per Serving
Calories: 15

HOW TO CREDIT
A 1/2 cup of pala'ai can be credited as EITHER a vegetable serving OR a whole grain equivalent in USDA meals in Hawai'i. For more info: SF 19-2024, CACFP 07-2024, SFSP 12-2024

Instant Pot Palusami with Pala'ai

Serves 6. This recipe from Mālama Kaua'i features a modernized, time-saving version of a traditional Polynesian dish, Palusami, enriched with local pala'ai. The recipe blends lū'au (taro leaves), pala'ai, corned beef, onions, and coconut milk, all wrapped and cooked using an Instant Pot, making this classic dish easily accessible in a school classroom. This recipe highlights local sourcing, family-style cooking, and celebrates Hawai'i's "use what get" approach to seasonal ingredients.

Ingredients:

- 24 Lū'au leaves (taro leaves)
- 1 Pala'ai (local pumpkin)
- 3 cans Corned beef
- 1 Onion
- *1 can Coconut milk
- Pa'akai (Hawaiian salt) and Pepper
- 12 Ti leaves, washed and de-boned, plus baker's string (OR use aluminum foil)



Instructions:

1. Wash your lū'au leaves and let dry. On a clean counter, make stacks of 4 leaves with your largest leaves on the bottom and smallest leaves on the top. Then prep your filling.
2. Wash and cut your pala'ai, leaving the skin on. Remove seeds and cut into large chunks. Then cut your onion into large chunks.
3. In a large bowl, add your corned beef, pala'ai, and onions and mix together.
4. Add your coconut milk. *Add half the can if you like your Palusami more savory. Add the whole can if you like your Palusami more sweet. Up to you!
5. Season with pa'akai and pepper and stir until everything is well combined.
6. Scoop your corned beef and pala'ai mixture out evenly onto your lū'au leaf stacks.
7. Wrap all of your Palusami tightly, folding over one side of your lū'au leaf stack, then folding in the two sides and rolling the bundle shut. Kind of like you would roll a burrito!
8. Wrap tightly in ti leaf and secure with string. Or wrap tightly in foil.
9. Add all 6 bundles to your Instant Pot. Add 1 ½ cups water to the Pot. Secure the lid and pressure cook for 1 hour 45 minutes to 2 hours.
10. Remove ti leaves and serve hot with a side of poi.

Mahalo Nui, Curtis!

Curtis Haida served as the Hawai'i Child Nutrition Program (HCNP) Farm to School Program Specialist from October 2023 until his recent retirement at the end of October 2025. During this time, he launched the monthly newsletter and a Hydroponic Grant for schools, and oversaw implementation of the Local Food for Schools (LFS) grant, through which Hawai'i's Team Nutrition recipes are being served in participating public and public charter schools. Mahalo nui (thank you very much), Curtis, for your dedicated contributions, and Happy Retirement!

Welina Mai, Lydi!

Lydi Morgan Bernal joined HCNP in early November 2025 as the new Farm to School Program Specialist. She brings nearly 20 years of experience working to strengthen Hawai'i's farm to school movement, first as a garden educator, then co-founder and founding coordinator of the Hawai'i Farm to School Network, then a University of Hawai'i Farm to School Extension Agent. Welina mai (welcome), Lydi!

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