Introduction

Slippery cabbage is known by many names. Solomon Islanders call it lettuce tree, island cabbage, bush cabbage, “slipery kabis,” reko in the Sa’a language and neka in the Roviana language. In some other places in the South Pacific, this leafy green vegetable is called Aibika (Papua New Guinea), Lau pele (Samoa), and bele (Fiji). Varieties with large wrinkled leaves are called “frog cabbage.” Slippery cabbage is high in protein, vitamins, minerals, and fiber. It is a cash crop at local markets.

AVRDC helps preserve different kinds of slippery cabbage

There are many different types of slippery cabbage grown in the Solomon Islands. AVRDC – The World Vegetable Center assists the SI Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock and the Kastom Gaden Association to collect and preserve many types of this important local vegetable.

How to grow slippery cabbage

Prepare planting area

Slippery cabbage grows well where it is hot and humid, in full sunlight or in part shade. It can be planted in flat rows if the garden soil is well drained. If water does not drain away quickly, it is best to make raised planting beds about 1 m wide and 20 cm high. Leave a 20-cm wide space between the beds. About one week before planting, dig animal manure and compost, straw, leaves, or grass into the soil or bed.

Plant stem cuttings

Cut a piece of stem about 25 cm long with 2 or 3 leaf joints from young stems of a healthy slippery cabbage plant. Young stems from the market also can be planted after picking off the leaves for cooking. Do not use old stems, as they are too slow to produce new leaves and branches. To plant, stick the cutting in the ground or raised bed.

Spacing

Space slippery cabbage cuttings about 60-90 cm apart. Some types of slippery cabbage grow tall. Others grow low and wide, like bushes. Leave a little more space between cuttings of bushy and “frog-leaf” types.

Slippery cabbage is often planted in the same row with other crops.

Crop Care

Weeding: Do not let weeds grow taller than the young slippery cabbage plants, as too much shade will kill the young plants. When the slippery cabbage is big and bushy, it will keep weeds from growing.

Watering: Water lightly to help the cuttings root. Watering may be needed during dry periods, but once the slippery cabbage plants are high enough to cast a shadow, they will need little water.

Mulching: Put dry grass or leaves on the ground around the plants to help keep moisture near the roots and control weeds.
When to harvest

The harvest can begin about 2-3 months after planting, and can continue for 1-2 years. Pick the leaves and young shoots. It will encourage the plant to produce more branches and more leaves. The tips also can be planted.

Pests and diseases

Shoot boring worms, leafhoppers, small black flea beetles, leaf rolling worms, aphids and mealybugs attack slippery cabbage. Pick these insects and their egg masses off by hand, and destroy them. Collect and bury or burn any damaged plants to prevent pests from spreading to other plants. This should be done each day.

Powdery mildew, leaf blight and stem rot may occur during rainy months. To prevent disease, grow slippery cabbage in a place with lots of sunlight where the air moves well. Plant slippery cabbage alongside coriander, nasturtiums, and petunias to help keep pests away. Do not grow slippery cabbage in the same plot after okra or plantain.

Select stem cuttings for future planting

Watch how different slippery cabbage types grow. Take cuttings from only the healthiest plants. Share cuttings and information with other farmers so everyone can learn more and grow better slippery cabbage. The Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock and the Kastom Gaden Association have different slippery cabbage types to share with growers.