



# Traditional Fijian farm bears healthy foods

Suliana Siwatibau in front of her home at Wailoku. Picture: SOPHIE RALULU



INSET: Suliana shows the wood burning stove she bought from New Zealand. Picture: SOPHIE RALULU



1. Home-made snacks and juice at the Siwatibau's residence in Wailoku. Picture: SOPHIE RALULU

2. Different varieties of yam can be found at Suliana Siwatibau's backyard farm. Picture: SOPHIE RALULU

3. Suliana Siwatibau backyard farm and garden are quite extraordinary and the perfect example of sustainable living. Picture: SOPHIE RALULU

4. A variety of breadfruit trees can be seen at the Siwatibau farm in Wailoku. Picture: SOPHIE RALULU

TRADITIONAL Fijian root crops may not be an important issue of discussion in our community nowadays as people, particularly farmers, are more into hybrid varieties of crops for commercial farming.

Commercial farming is something that is needed nowadays as it is a fast and easy way of earning income.

However, we still have in our communities people who are passionate about retaining traditional root crops and traditional methods of farming.

Suliana Siwatibau, a name synonymous in the local academic arena, is someone who is working hard to retain at least some of these traditional crops because she believes it is important to retain root crops and food Fiji is known for.

She is also interested in traditional crops because they are special to Fiji but also because they enable us to keep a large gene pool which means that we have a larger stock of crop features we can develop in future to adapt to changes both in the environment and in consumer needs.

Nestled in the lush greens of Wailoku outside Suva is her almost 12-acre property, which is home to varieties of traditional root crops she managed to collect from around the country as part of her struggle to keep traditional root crops alive.

It was in 2004 when the wife of the late academic leader, former governor of the Reserve Bank of Fiji and former vice-chancellor of the University of the South Pacific, Savenaca Siwatibau, decided to embark on the journey she had fallen in love with ever since her young days.

"This farm is something like a hobby and in 2004 we start-

ed cleaning up and I wanted to test what we could grow," Mrs Siwatibau said.

"This has been a childhood hobby and I suppose so because my father was an agricultural officer and my mother loves planting.

"I was brought up in the village by my maternal grandparents, my mom's village in Nailega, Tailevu.

"The reason it is good to have agro-forestry and mixed crop system like our traditional farming system is because our lands are so hilly. Not much flat land that we can easily plant commercially with only one crop as they do overseas. In our traditional system, the farmers planted different crops to suit different aspects of the land available to them."

At 76 years of age, the soft-spoken Moturiki native still believes we should utilise traditional farming methods where there are mixed crops in one plantation.

They would plant dalo on the lower area, cassava on the slope and other related methods our ancestors have been using for years.

A visitor to this family property in Wailoku would marvel at the beauty of the green forests covered with natural beauty but a few more steps inside and you would be welcomed by the traditional farm which is neatly stacked beside the large, wooden, green house surrounded by the beauty of nature.

"We began this farm in 2004 but we have had this land for many years. We have been travelling in and out of the country so it was just sitting there like bush.

"I have found out that as we commercialise farming, we be-

gin to lose our traditional root crop varieties.

"I am glad that I have some of the cultivars of dalo, cassava, bananas, plantains and wild yams."

Because of this passion, Mrs Siwatibau, a botanist travelled to many places around the country to collect cultivars of these traditional root crops but while she couldn't get a hold of many of them, she was relieved that she could at least collect a few different varieties.

With the assistance of a few farm hands, the healthy-looking retired academic loves to enjoy the comfort of her farm, visit it regularly and even enjoys the harvesting period.

She shared that maintaining the farm and ensuring the root crops are provided the best care was something that would keep these crops healthy.

And Wailoku provided the best land for most of these crops, although some were not able to grow properly.

The harvest from the farm are eaten and shared to families because the primary objective is to keep them so she would continue with the tradition she has been enjoying for the past 13 years.

The philosophy behind this farm is organic farm so weedicides and pesticides are never used on them.

However, natural methods of weeding out pests are used. The farm is surrounded by *Gliricidia*, which is used as fertiliser and pesticide for these root crops.

While she may have other commitments to another life-passion, community work, she made sure the farm is neatly surrounded by varieties of root crops.

Mrs Siwatibau has been at the helm of various non-governmental organisations for many years and she has recently retired from some of those roles as she wanted to concentrate on her farm and enjoy the scenes around her Wailoku home daily.

She also explained that her house has its own water catchment and this is the only water source they use daily for their lives.

As an enthusiast for the environment, Mrs Siwatibau's house was built in a way to complement the beauty of nature and that every living creature surrounding her get to enjoy the beauty of life with her on this earth.

Her farm is surrounded by traditional wild yams which she also collected while on visits around the country and other natural wild flowers so while relaxing, she gets to enjoy watching butterflies and other wild insects enjoy their feed on flowers of root crops she plants on her farm.

At 76, Mrs Siwatibau still enjoys cooking on her wood burning stove which she purchased from New Zealand, this being the only source of fire she uses to cook her food daily.

She also believes people should always think of their environment and this is a way of utilising the environment which surrounds her and of course making use of what God provides for her.

If there was a message the retired academic would like to offer Fijians particularly young ones, it would be to live a healthy and simple life, be appreciative of the environment and learn to respect every living creature around you.



Suliana Siwatibau shows Fijian herbal medicine from her backyard garden in Wailoku. Picture: SOPHIE RALULU