



# Ki ho`alu Guitar Tunings

a Slack Key Reference Manual  
by Scott Hillman

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## Sample Chapter – Taro Patch Tuning

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5<sup>th</sup> Edition

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# Introduction

Ki ho Alu is a Hawaiian term that means “loosen – or slacken – the strings”. One of the distinguishing characteristics of the slack key guitar style is the use of multiple tunings, where one or more strings are tuned differently – usually lower or “slackened” – from the standard guitar tuning (EADGBE) used in most western music. To date, more than a hundred slack key tunings have been documented, with the likelihood that many more have been lost with the passing of their originating players.

The purpose of this manual is to provide a reference for exploring chord positions in a selection of 20 slack key tunings. Of the many known slack key tunings, those included in this manual were selected because:

- They represent most of the tunings used by both early and contemporary slack key artists found in available recordings today
- They represent the interesting ways that tunings can vary, and demonstrate the unique characteristics or “personality” of each of the tunings.

It is important to note that this is a reference manual, not a slack key instruction manual. For beginning students, the initial goal should not be to master multiple tunings, rather to develop song and chord repertoire in a single tuning first, before moving on to material in other tunings.

The chord reference material in this manual will be most useful for learning to play variations of chords in a single tuning at different positions on the guitar neck (useful for improvising), and leaning to play songs that are typically played in a specific tuning.

## Using this Manual

This manual is divided into three sections:

**Section 1 – Introduction** – Advice about how to read the chord chart diagrams, choosing chord positions on the neck, and an overview of slack key tuning classifications.

**Section 2 – Tunings** - This is the chord chart section of the manual, which also includes some background information about each tuning, a selection of the common first position chords, and “open and closed” position diagrams.

The ten first position chords that are shown for each tuning are “full” chord positions, which means that they use the maximum number of available chord notes and strings. Something to keep in mind: although these positions show a way to play the most complete version of the chord in the first position, they are not necessarily the positions most commonly used. In practice, slack key artists often use partial chords, where fewer strings are played, and therefore fewer strings are fretted. The student is encouraged to use these positions as a starting point for learning the basic first position chords, but also to experiment with different string combinations that suit the material being played.

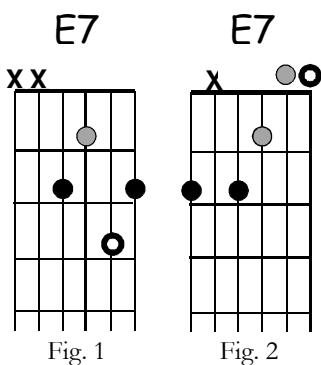
**Section 3 – General Information** – This section provides a brief introduction to music theory: scales, intervals, and chord structure. It also includes some information about tuning the guitar, string gauges, and lists sources for recorded material and other information resources for slack key tunings.

## The Neck Diagrams

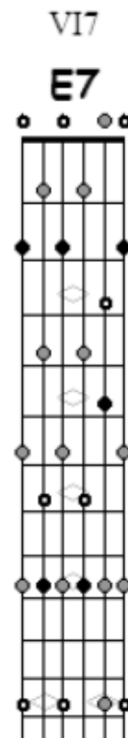
Each of the tunings in Section 2 is presented with a collection of diagrams that show a view of the guitar neck (frets 1 through 12), with all the possible notes that can be used to play a specific chord represented as dots on the strings. The diagram at the right, for example, shows all possible chord notes for an E7 chord in the Open G or Taro Patch tuning.

Three types of dots are used to indicate where chord notes can be fretted on the neck. The solid black dots indicate frets where the root note of the chord can be found. The “hollow” dots are 7<sup>th</sup> notes, and the grey dots are other chord notes, i.e., other than a root or a 7<sup>th</sup> note.

The dots at the top of the diagram (above the nut) show which strings can be played “open”, i.e., unfretted. So in the case of the E7 chord, the first, second, fourth, and sixth strings, when played open, are all notes in the E7 chord. An “X” shown at the top of the diagram indicates that that string should not be played.



As the diagram at the right shows, there are many ways to play an E7 chord at different places on the neck, using different combinations of strings. The choice will depend on a number of considerations, including the register in which the chord notes are played (i.e. high notes vs. low notes) and the number of strings used. The diagrams at the left show two common ways of playing an E7 chord in the first position. The chord in figure 1 is played on the top four strings, leaving out the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> strings. Lacking a bass note on the lower strings, this position would be useful for a strum on the top four strings or a very short picking sequence that did not require a bass note.



The chord in Figure 2 uses strings 6, 4, 3, 2, and 1, and leaves out the 5<sup>th</sup> string. The advantage of this position is that it provides the root note of the chord as a bass note on the 6<sup>th</sup> string. Having the root note of a chord on one of the bass strings (4, 5, or 6) is important in slack key, since the most common right-hand picking patterns rely on the thumb to play the alternating bass notes (root and fifth or root and third) on the lower strings to provide the rhythmic foundation for the melody, which is played on the top strings (1-3).

Other variations of an E7 chord in the first position are shown in the diagrams below. Chords played higher on the neck can be formed in the same way, using combinations of the open and fretted strings shown in the neck diagram. So the neck diagrams don't show you how to play, or where to find a chord, rather they show all the possible notes from the first to the twelfth fret that can be used to form a chord. How do you choose, then, which notes to play? The answer depends on a number of factors that are explained in more detail in the next section. [This section is not included in the sample.]

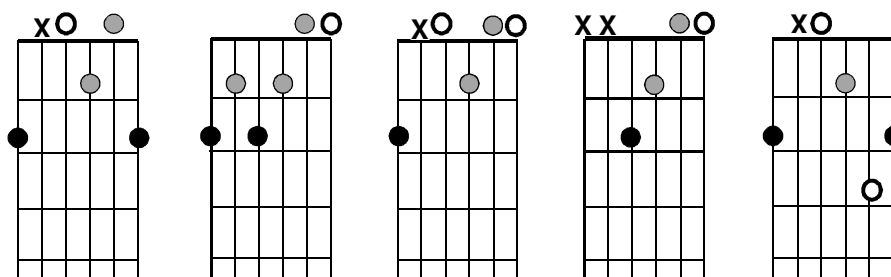


Fig. 3

# Open Tunings

## Taro Patch (D G D G B D)

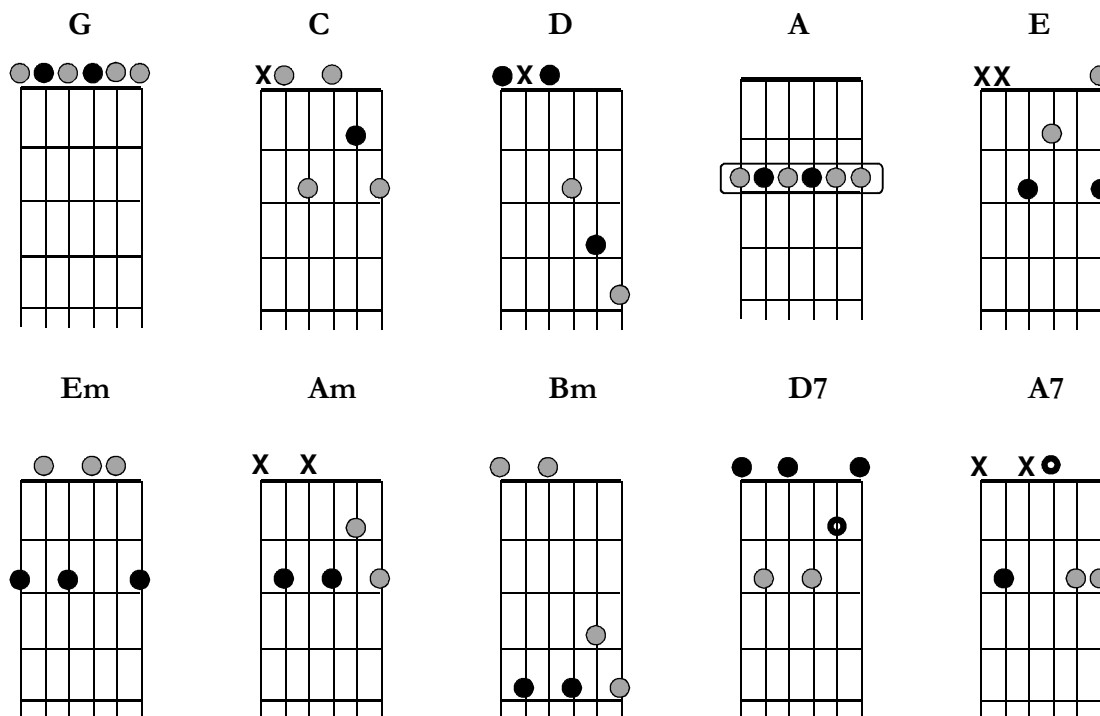
String	6	5	4	3	2	1
Note	D	G	D	G	B	D
# of steps from std tuning	-1	-1	0	0	0	-1
# of frets to match next string	5	7	5	4	3	

### Notes

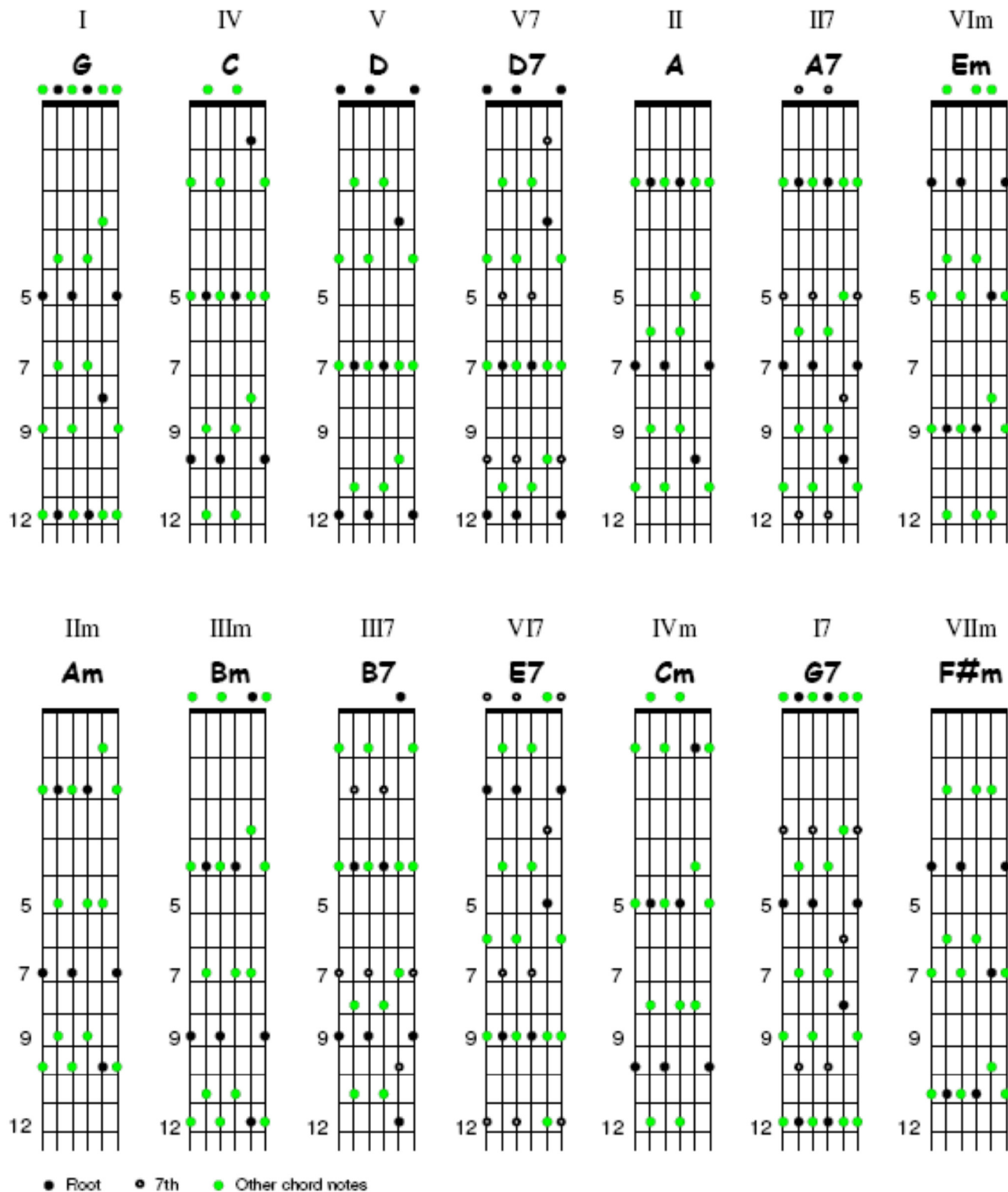
Taro Patch is the most common of the slack key tunings and is usually the first tuning that most slack key students learn. This tuning is also known as Open G, since the open strings are tuned to the notes of a G major chord (G, B, and D). Open tunings provide a good basis for playing melody notes up the neck and using finger picking patterns where the thumb picks alternating bass notes on the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> strings. Open tunings also provide a foundation for hammer-on and pull-off techniques, as well as major chord harmonics (“chimes”) at the 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> frets.

The origin of this tuning is unclear; also known as the “Spanish” tuning because it was associated with the Spanish Fandango, a well-known early American parlor guitar piece from the 1800s. This tuning was also adopted by early blues players in the southern U.S. It may have been independently invented by Hawaiians, or introduced by the Mexican cowboys who brought their guitars to Hawaii in the early 1800s. An article with additional details can be found at <http://jasobrecht.com/blues-origins-spanish-fandango-and-sebastopol/>

### First Position Chords



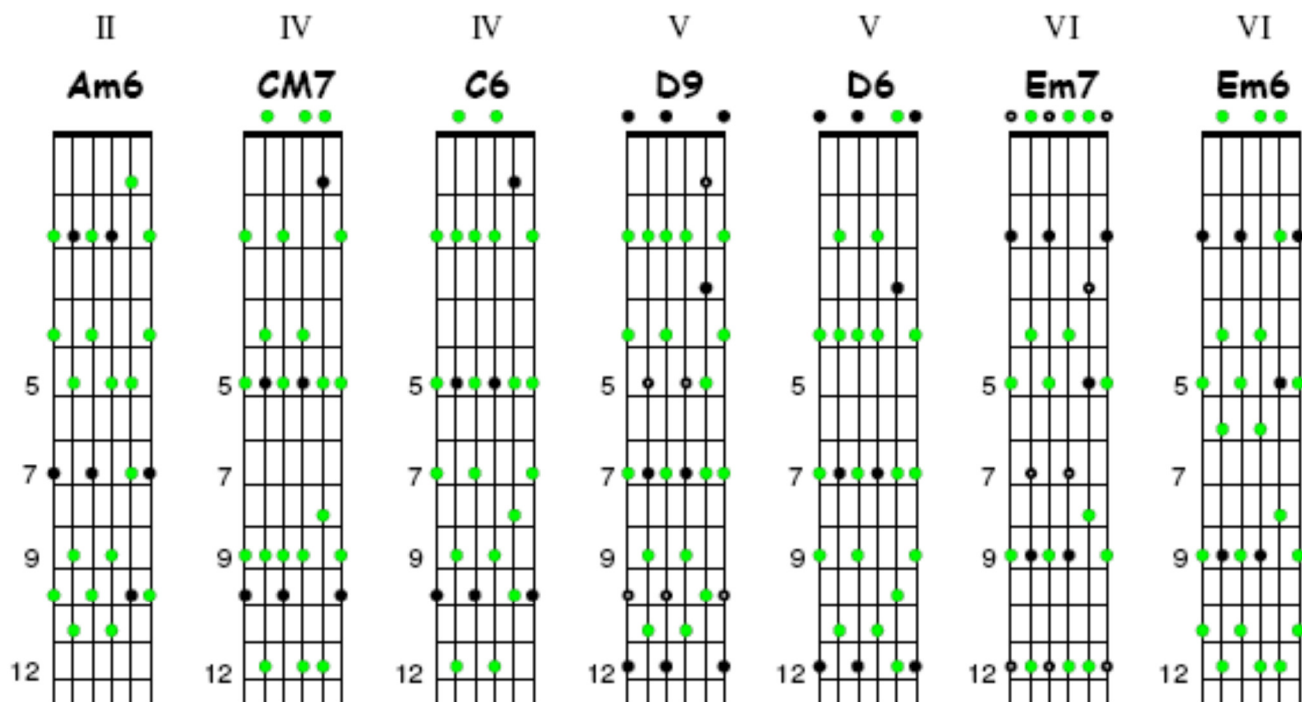
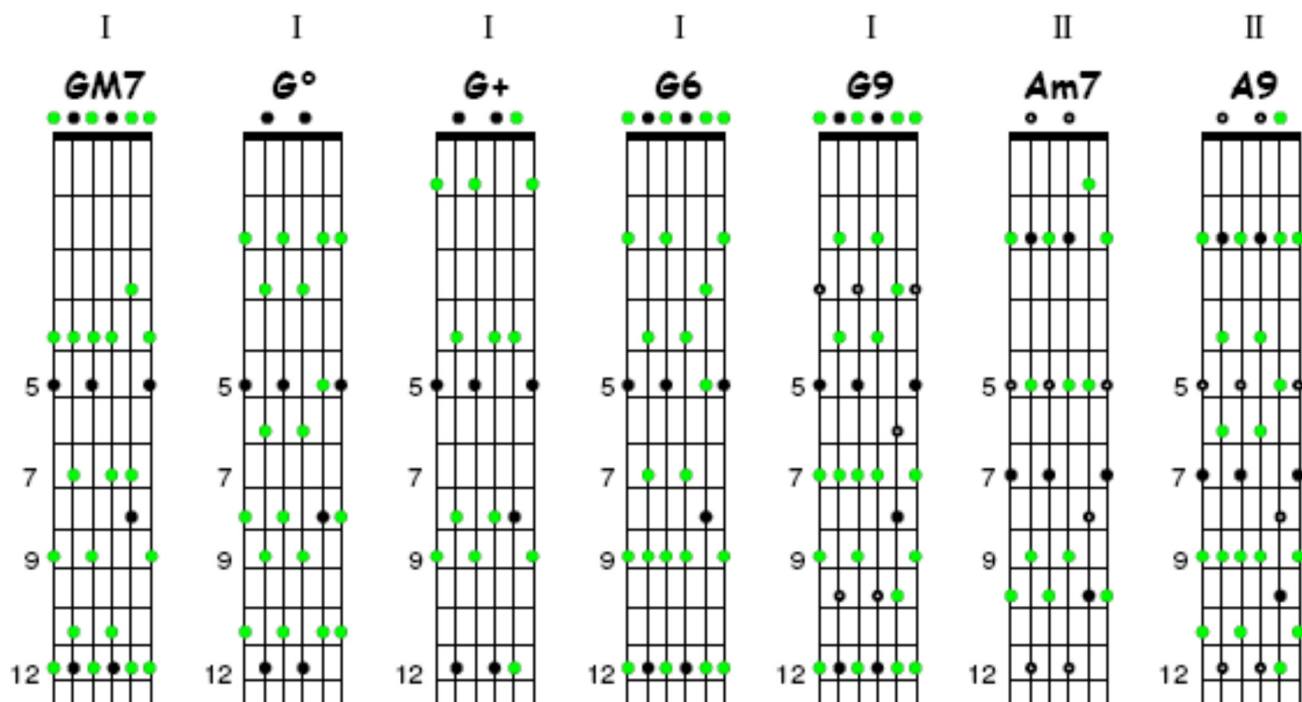
## Taro Patch (D G D G B D) – Key: G



Circle of 5ths progression: F#7→B7→E7→A7→D7→G

Relative minor chords: Em, Am, Bm

# Taro Patch (D G D G B D) – Key: G, chord set 2



● Root ● 7th ● Other chord notes

Circle of 5ths progression: F#7→B7→E7→A7→D7→G

Relative minor chords: Em, Am, Bm



# Taro Patch (D G D G B D) – Parallel Sixths and Thirds

