

SWEET POTATO

Sweet potatoes are a warm-season crop that is often overlooked as an easy-to-grow, productive garden vegetable. They are tolerant of hot dry weather, with few pest concerns. Sweet potatoes do sprawl more than Irish potatoes and need plenty of room. Sweet potatoes are nutritious and easy to store in household conditions for future use.

Varieties

Most common varieties are dark orange, moist, and sweet and fall into the Puerto Rican type varieties. Jewel, Pope, Georgia Jet (red skin), Centennial, and Travis (red skin) are common varieties. Sweet potatoes are grown from plants, usually called "slips," that can be purchased in bundles from your local garden center.

You can also grow your own by placing a sweet potato root in a container filled with moist sand and allowing it to sprout in a warm location for about six weeks before setting plants in the garden.

When to plant

Sweet potatoes can be injured by any degree of cold weather. Wait until mid- to late May before attempting to plant. Sweet potatoes need to be planted on a ridge or mound of loose soil about 8-12 inches high to provide a bearing area for the fleshy roots to develop later in the season.

Spacing

Plant about 12 inches apart in rows at least 3 feet apart. Vines may spread to 6-8 feet wide.

Care

Avoid planting sweet potatoes in excessively rich or highly fertilized soils. The plants grow best in moderately fertile soil. Sweet potatoes are adapted to grow well in drier weather, but a thorough deep watering in early August during dry periods will improve yields. Hoe as needed early in the season to prevent weeds from developing; later in the season the dense vine growth will suppress weeds.

Harvesting

Sweet potatoes continue to develop throughout the season and do not deteriorate in quality if they get too large. It usually takes until mid-September to mid-October for the fleshy roots to enlarge to a harvestable stage. Dig before freezing weather occurs. Cut or chop the vines a few days before digging to make digging easier.

After digging, break the roots from the vine and allow them to air dry for a few hours before picking them up. Gently place roots in baskets or boxes to avoid injury to the tender skin.

Sweet potatoes must be "cured" in a warm humid location for 1-2 weeks to improve keeping quality and flavor. Place the baskets in an 80-90° F environment with high humidity for 7-10 days. Then lower the temperature to around 55° F for long-term storage.

Never allow temperatures to drop below 50° F as poor keeping quality, flavors, and dark colors will result. If sweet potatoes are washed before storing, make sure they are handled carefully and dried before curing.

Nutritional value and use

Sweet potato roots are a storehouse of nutrition. One average sized root provides one-half the recommended daily allowance of vitamin C, twice the vitamin A, as well as significant amounts of calcium, iron, niacin and riboflavin. They also provide protein. They can be baked, mashed, or boiled as well as served with numerous other ingredients including marshmallows, brown sugar, raisins, and others (which often add significantly to the calories). Sweet potato pie is a favorite southern dish as well as using the pureed roots to make breads, muffins and puddings.

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