

SUSTAINABLE GARDENING

FOR SCHOOL AND HOME GARDENS

Sweet Potato

Ipomoea batatas



QUICK FACTS

- Plant family: Convolvulaceae (Morning Glory)
- Season: Warm
- Life cycle: Annual
- Seed to first harvest: 90-120 days

History

Sweet potato is a member of the Convolvulaceae family, also known as morning glories, which includes flowering plants like morning glory and dichondra, and weeds such as bindweed. The crop is primarily grown around the world for its nutritious storage roots, although sweet potato greens are also used as a leafy vegetable in soups, stir fries and other dishes in various parts of the world such as Asia, Africa and the Pacific. Sweet potato is the only member of this family cultivated for food in the United States although a relative grown in waterways and upland, Kang Kong, Pak Bung (*Ipomoea aquatica*), is a delicacy in Asia and is an important ethnic vegetable for communities here in the U.S. This crop, however, is considered a noxious weed and cultivation is not allowed in several states.

The sweet potato was found on the fourth voyage of Christopher Columbus. It was known in the West Indies and also on islands off the coast of the Yucatan and Honduras, where it was called axi and batatas by the natives. In 1514, nine different varieties were recorded to be grown in Honduras. It was taken to Spain around 1500 and by mid-century, several kinds were cultivated there, including red, purple, and white-fleshed varieties. European cultivation had limited success, but early Spanish explorers are believed to have taken the sweet potato to the Philippines and East Indies, from where it was soon carried to India, China, and Malaya by



Figure 1. Sweet potatoes belong to the Convolvulaceae family, which also includes morning glories, dichondra, and bindweed.

Portuguese voyagers. Introduction from America to the Asian Pacific went so unnoticed that it was long thought to be native to southern and southeastern Asia. Never popular in cool, temperate Europe, the sweet potato is an important food crop in the hot, moist climates of the East Indies, India, and China and has become the third most important food crop in Japan. See Figure 2.



Figure 2. Map showing the origin and migration of sweet potatoes.

Sweet potatoes were known to be cultivated in Virginia at least as early as 1648 and were recorded as a Native American food crop in the 1700s. They are still preferred as a staple food in the South, as opposed to the Irish potato in the northern U.S.

In Louisiana, commercial sweet potato production began around 1910. There are two types of sweet potatoes: “dry-fleshed” or white roots (preferred in the northern U.S.) and “moist-fleshed” or orange roots (preferred in the southern U.S.). With the LSU release of the attractive, orange, healthful Porto Rico sweet potato, Louisiana became more competitive in the market. In 1937, the Louisiana industry began marketing its moist, orange-fleshed sweet potatoes as “yams” to

differentiate from the drier, white-fleshed roots of other markets. Outside of the United States, the word “yam” refers to a completely different edible tuber, *Dioscorea*, which is not consumed to a great extent in the U.S.

Sweet potatoes are actually perennials in warm climates (lives two or more years) but are most commonly grown as an annual crop (one season/year). Today sweet potatoes are a common crop grown in southern home gardens, and production is expanding to other parts of the U.S. such as the northwest. Sweet potato is commonly grown for its storage roots although there is a demand for sweet potato greens by some consumers in U.S.

Growing

Varieties

Sweet potatoes are a warm season crop considered a root vegetable, as they are grown for their fleshy, tuberous roots. Originating from a tropical climate, sweet potatoes perform best in similarly warm climates with at least four frost-free months and are not cold hardy. Unlike other crops, they are grown from vine cuttings, or bare root “slips,” propagated from sprouted sweet potato mother roots. Similar to pumpkins, winter squash, and melons, this root crop has a vining habit and takes a long time to mature (around 90-120 days). Sweet potatoes are most commonly bred for flavor and disease resistance. Sweet potato varieties are generally grouped by the color of their flesh, which is predominantly either orange or white. While some purple-fleshed varieties exist, they are less moist and sweet than the orange- and white-fleshed varieties. Sweet potato varieties also vary by skin color (hues of red, orange, tan, gold, and purple), size and shape, and yield.

In addition, sweet potato cultivars vary due to leaf shape ranging from heart-shaped to deeply lobed (maple-leaf or palmate) forms. Cultivars are largely categorized by leaf shapes such as triangular, rounded, or tapered, with some specifically bred for ornamental, deeply divided and colored foliage and others for edible, green heart-shaped leaves. Sweet potato has a showy flower similar to morning glory, with pale pink flowers with a reddish, lavender, or purple trumpet shaped throat. Flowers open early in the morning and close and wilt within hours. Pollination is by insects. Flowers form a round seed capsule with one to four seed. Seed from



Figure 3. Sweet potatoes grown in Louisiana are generally either orange or white fleshed.

the sweet potato flower is not used for propagation but is important for breeding purposes. Sweet potato is a natural hexaploid crop, meaning it has six sets of chromosomes. It is not normally propagated by true seed but vegetatively by shoots from mature roots.

The LSU AgCenter Sweet Potato Research Station is the only U.S. research station solely dedicated to the sweet potato and the development of new varieties. Beauregard, an LSU release from the late 1980s, is grown around the world for its good yields and taste and is the industry standard for U.S. commercial growers.

See the recommended sweet potato varieties for Louisiana in Table 1.

Table 1. Recommended Sweet Potato Varieties for Louisiana

Variety Name	Description	Days to Harvest	Comments
Orange Flesh			
Avoyelles*	Light rose to copper skin, orange flesh	90 days	Very early. Resistant to Southern root knot nematode
Bayou Belle*	Red-purple skin, deep orange flesh; similar to Evangeline with firmer texture; higher yielding than Beauregard but less consistent	90-120 days	Soil rot, Southern root knot nematode, Fusarium wilt, Rhizopus soft rot resistance
Beauregard*	Rose skin, deep orange flesh; twining habit; early maturing and good storage variety; high yielding commercial standard for U.S. B-14: selection from North Carolina; B-63: selection from Louisiana	90-120 days	Soil rot, Fusarium wilt, Rhizopus soft rot, Fusarium root rot, Sclerotial blight resistance
Bellevue*	Copper skin, bright orange flesh; high-yielding and stores well	90-100 days	Soil rot, Southern root knot nematode, Fusarium wilt, Rhizopus soft rot resistance
Bienville	Light rose skin, orange flesh	90-120 days	Southern root knot nematode, Fusarium wilt, Rhizopus soft rot, Fusarium root rot resistance
Burgundy	Red skin, deep orange flesh; very sweet; good yield and stores well	90-100 days	Soil rot, Southern root knot nematode, Fusarium wilt resistance
Covington	Copper-rose skin, bright orange flesh; sweet taste; concentrated yields, uniform shape, reliable	90-120 days	Rhizopus soft rot, Southern root knot nematode, soil rot, Fusarium wilt resistance
Evangeline*	Light rose skin, intense orange flesh; sweeter than Beauregard; good yield	100 days	Soil rot, Southern root knot nematode, Fusarium wilt, Rhizopus soft rot resistance
Georgia Jet	Red skin, bright orange flesh; sweet; high yielding, early maturing variety; stores well; cold tolerant	100-120 days	
Heartogold	Tan skin, bright orange milky flesh; sweet and flavorful; high yielding	90-120 days	Southern root knot nematode, bacterial root rot resistance
Hernandez	Light red skin, deep orange flesh; very sweet; high yields, late developing	120 days	Soil rot, Southern root knot nematode, Fusarium wilt, Fusarium and bacterial root rot resistance
Jewel	Copper skin, orange flesh	90-120 days	Rhizopus soft rot, Southern and Guava root knot nematodes, Fusarium wilt resistance
Orleans*	Light rose skin, orange flesh; similar to Beauregard but produces a more consistent, uniform crop	95 days	Fusarium wilt, Rhizopus soft rot, Fusarium root rot, soil rot resistance
Porto Rico*	Copper skin, salmon flesh; compact vines; good producer	110-120 days	Fusarium and bacterial root rot resistance
Vardaman	Gold skin, deep orange flesh; compact, bush habit; stores well and productive	95-100 days	

Variety Name	Description	Days to Harvest	Comments
White Flesh			
Bonita	Light tan skin, white flesh; very sweet; high yields and good storage variety	110-115 days	Southern root knot nematode, soil rot, Fusarium wilt, Rhizopus soft rot resistance
Murasaki*	Dark purple skin, white flesh; dry texture and unique flavor; good yields of uniform shape; Japanese variety	100-120 days	Soil rot, Southern and Guava root knot nematodes, Fusarium wilt, Rhizopus soft rot, Fusarium root rot resistance
O'Henry*	Tan skin, light yellow flesh; sweet and creamy; Beauregard mutation	100 days	Soil rot, Fusarium wilt, Rhizopus soft rot, Fusarium root rot resistance
Texas Porto Rico*	Red skin, white flesh; mutation of Porto Rico	115-120 days	Fusarium root rot resistance

Notes: Table varieties selected from recommendations from LSU AgCenter, Southeastern U.S. Vegetable Crop Handbook, and UF Extension. Variety descriptions compiled from LSU AgCenter, Johnny's Selected Seeds, Stark Bro's, and Southern Exposure Seed Exchange.

* Available through LSU AgCenter Foundation Seed Program

Other recommended varieties for Louisiana include: Boniato/Picadito, Centennial and Sakura

When and How to Plant

Sweet potatoes are a tender, warm season, tropical crop. Soil temperatures must be over 65 °F and nighttime temperatures over 50 °F to succeed with propagation and transplanting. A soil temperature map can be very helpful for guiding planting decisions. It is recommended to account for about 150 days before soil temperatures drop to 55 °F in the fall for this crop to reach full maturity.

Sweet potato “slips” (unrooted shoots) may be purchased in bundles at a garden center or from reputable online suppliers. In Louisiana, best results are obtained with foundation seed: sweet potatoes from the LSU AgCenter program that produces virus-indexed roots from healthy, disease-free plants. Order foundation seed (roots) through your [County Agent's office](#) in December and bed out roots for slip production when soils warm. Plant new slips as soon as possible, or store loosely in soil in a sunny, warm location until ready to transplant.

Sweet potatoes can be propagated six to eight weeks before outside planting dates by planting healthy sweet potatoes, often called mother roots or seed roots (1½ to 3 inches in diameter) after the last frost date, when soil temperatures are at least 66 F to 70 F. Plant whole sweet potatoes shallowly in a high, well-drained bed and cover with 2 inches of loose soil. Keep soil moist and cover with clear or black plastic to aid in warming the soil. Remove the plastic when shoots have emerged and begun to push up the plastic. See Figure 4. Allow shoots

to grow 12 to 14 inches tall, then cut each shoot about 2 inches above the soil line and transplant into garden rows. Cutting above the soil line avoids transferring soil borne diseases and sweet potato weevils, a damaging pest of sweet potatoes, to the garden. An ideal transplant will be 10 to 12 inches long and have five to six leaves. Planting and propagating a single sweet potato can produce 10 to 20 slips, enough to plant a 10 to 20 foot row of sweet potatoes.

Regardless of whether sweet potato slips are purchased or propagated, they should be planted 2 to 4 inches deep to submerge two or more nodes beneath the soil while keeping at least two leaves and the terminal node or tip above ground. Refer to the Sweet Potato Planting Guide (Table 2) for propagation and transplanting dates and recommended plant spacing. Wide plant spacing will allow for larger, faster maturing sweet potatoes, while wide row spacing allows room for the vining habit. In Africa, sweet potato for “potato greens” are grown at very close spacing on raised beds. The optimum growing temperature for best growth is 70 F to 90 F, with a 55 F minimum and 105 F maximum.

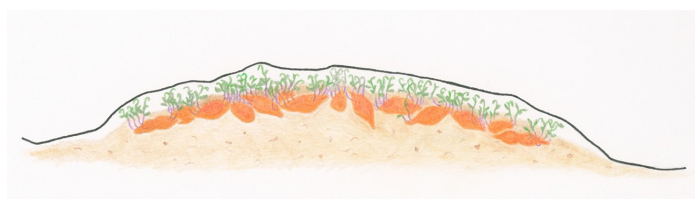


Figure 4. Sweet potato propagation bed with slips or shoots emerging from the mother roots pushing up on the plastic bed cover.

Table 2. Sweet Potato Planting Guide

Outside Planting Dates to Grow Your Own Slips	Slip Transplant Dates	Plant Spacing (inches)	Row Spacing (feet)	Days to Harvest*
North LA: April 1-15 South LA: March 15-31	North LA: May-June South LA: April 15-June	10-14"	3-4'	90-120 days

* Days from transplant

Where to Plant

Sweet potatoes are an extremely heat tolerant, warm season crop that thrives in hot, moist conditions. A loose, well-drained clay or loam (sandy or silty) soil with a soil pH of 5.0 to 7.5 is recommended. A low pH (5.0-6.0) reduces incidence of soil rot. Plant in an area that receives full sun (six to eight hours/day). Native to the Caribbean, Louisiana's summers produce excellent sweet potato crops with hot days and warm nights. It is recommended to plant slips in raised beds, hills, or rows at least 8 inches tall and with enough space between rows to allow for light "hilling", raking soil up over the young plant to encourage development and reduce sweet potato weevil problems and greening of roots. In all types of gardens, it is recommended to add a layer of compost, peat moss, rotted hay or other organic matter and mix into the soil to optimize plant health, especially for sweet potatoes grown on sandy soils.

To avoid a buildup of sweet potato pests and diseases, rotate to a new planting area every year and do not return to the original planting area for three to four years.

Plant Care

It is recommended to follow [sustainable gardening](#) principles.

Watering: Maintain moist soil early in the season to develop a good fibrous root system. Roots will develop storage roots (sweet potatoes) 25-30 days after transplanting. After "setting"—the development of edible roots—keep soil moist by irrigating during dry periods. This helps to increase the size of roots that have already been set. Do not overwater, as this may lead to root rotting diseases.

A common recommendation is to cease watering the last two to three weeks before harvest to avoid rotting.

Fertilization: Sweet potatoes are relatively light

nitrogen feeders, but they do require high levels of potassium. Sweet potatoes grown in soils that are high in organic matter may not need fertilization at all. Do not overfertilize, as this may cause plants to produce an overabundance of vines and few sweet potato roots.

Organic fertilizers such as compost, fish emulsion, composted poultry litter or manure, worm castings, and blood or bone meal originate from living organisms. They are far more environmentally sustainable and safe than traditional synthetic fertilizers. They naturally release nutrients more slowly and over a longer period of time. When applying organic fertilizer, it is important to use in unison with compost, cover crops and crop rotation, which all work together to build soil health. Learn how to convert inorganic fertilizer recommendations for organic fertilizer [here](#).

Alternatively, a synthetic fertilizer may be used at a rate of about 1 pound (2 cups) of 13-13-13 for every 25 feet of row or 75 square feet, applied several days before transplanting. Broadcast or sprinkle evenly over the soil and then mix in about 3 to 6 inches deep using a rake. Supplemental side-dressing, or reapplication of synthetic fertilizer later in the crop, is unnecessary for sweet potatoes, unless grown in extremely sandy soils.

Weeds: Remove weeds by hand-weeding or shallow cultivation early in the crop. Keeping the beds weed-free is especially important for the first 40 days after planting. Plants will form vines that will eventually cover the soil surface and shade out weeds.

Insects, Pests and Diseases: The most common insect pests are white grubs, wireworms, and sweet potato weevils. This weevil causes Louisiana to quarantine the movement of sweet potato plants and roots (including ornamentals) grown in the southern parts of the state from the northern parts, where sweet potato weevils are uncommon. Poor drainage and lack of crop rotation may contribute to several diseases like Rhizopus soft rot, Fusarium wilt, blight and root rots. Refer to Table

1 for selection of varieties resistant to these diseases. Good cultural practices such as adequate plant spacing, crop rotation, and weed control can help manage all of these problems. See Table 3 to aid in diagnosis and management of some common sweet potato insect pests and diseases.

Table 3. Organic and Natural Management for Common Sweet Potato Insect Pests and Diseases

Symptoms	Diagnosis	Organic and Natural Management
- Stunted new growth - Leaf curl and discoloration - Sticky honeydew	Aphids	- Dislodge with water jet - Insect barrier fabric - Beneficial insects: lady bugs, lacewings, predatory stink bugs, syrphid flies - Insecticidal soap, neem oil, pyrethrin, Azera
- Larvae (rootworms) eat holes in the roots - Irregular cavities under the root skin - Irregular holes on foliage	Cucumber Beetles	- Azadirachtin, garlic juice extract, pyrethrins - Field cultivation
- Feeding on ground-level plant stems and leaves - Dry soil conditions and holes in roots	Cutworms	Azadirachtin, <i>Bt</i>
Broad, irregular gouges in root surface	Grub worms	- Avoid planting in pastureland - Rotate to new area yearly - Beneficial organisms: parasitic nematodes - Biologicals: <i>Beauveria bassiana</i>, milky spore disease
- Plant with reduced growth and vigor, wilt - Root galling - Deformed, cracked, knotted roots - Large and dark lesions on storage roots	Root-knot Nematodes	- Plant resistant varieties - Marigold cropping prior to planting reduces nematode populations - Treat soil with fumigants before planting
- Sunken spots on roots - Soft, water-soaked tissue - Chlorotic leaves	Rots	- Plant resistant varieties - Plant in recommended soil conditions - Crop rotation (3-4 years) - Seed treatment - Soil solarization - Use certified seed - Provide adequate ventilation in storage - Avoid unnecessary scarring and chilling injury
- Mottled leaves - Radial cracks in roots - Stunting	Viruses (SPFMV, SPSVV)	- Use certified seed - Plant resistant varieties - Control aphid vectors

Symptoms	Diagnosis	Organic and Natural Management
- Feeding and tunneling in roots - Tunneling in vines	Weevils	Destroy plant residue
Small circular or oblong holes on surface of roots	Wireworms	- Fallow field several weeks before planting to allow decomposition of organic matter - Pretreat soil with pesticides before planting

Note: Adapted from LSU AgCenter, Texas A&M Extension, and University of Georgia Extension. The Louisiana Pesticide Law regulates the use of pesticides in schools to protect children and staff from harmful exposure to chemicals and is enforced by LDAF. The recommended alternative to routine pesticide use is Integrated Pest Management (IPM), which combines pest control, disease management techniques and organic/natural alternatives, many of which are found in this table.

Harvest and Storage

Sweet potatoes are generally easy to grow and high yielding, typically producing more than a pound of sweet potatoes per plant. Start checking sweet potatoes for desired harvest size after 80 days by digging around a hill when the soil isn't too dry. Roots will continue to increase in size during the last two to three weeks of the crop. Harvest before frost kills the vines, loosening the soil with a spading fork or shovel and lifting the root system from the ground. Minimize bruising and skinning, as this decreases storage life. Avoid sun exposure of dug roots.

Sweet potatoes must be cured after harvest and before storage. Uncured roots do not bake well but can still be candied or used in pies or casseroles. Curing increases moisture and sugar content and heals cuts and bruises. Cure by storing unwashed sweet potatoes in a warm (80 F to 90 F), humid (80% to 90%) environment for five to 10 days. After curing, sweet

potatoes can be stored for months at 55 F to 65 F in a dry, dark, well-ventilated area. Lower temperatures (like in a refrigerator) will cause potatoes to develop a hard center; higher temperatures will cause sprouting, pithiness, and shriveling.

Sweet potatoes may be preserved by canning and freezing. They may be baked whole and frozen, individually wrapped.

The sweet potato is considered an important "nutraceutical," a food containing health-giving additives and having medicinal benefits. The Center for Science in the Public Interest ranked it number one of all vegetables in nutritional content. An excellent source of vitamin A (orange-flesh types) and dietary fiber, sweet potatoes contain significant amounts of vitamin C, vitamin E, vitamin B9 (folate), β -carotene and various minerals and are high in phenolic acids, naturally occurring antioxidants.

Nutrition

Sweet Potatoes are Nutritious and Good for You

Very high in Vitamin A

Important for eye health, a strong immune system, and cell growth.

Rich in Vitamin C and B9

Important for bones, skin, blood vessels; essential for metabolism and nerve, muscle, and heart health.

High in Potassium

Essential for body function, especially the heart, kidney, nerves, bones, and muscle.

Rich in Iron

Produces red blood cells.

Provides Calcium

Important for bone health.

Good Source of Dietary Fiber

Important for bowel health, lowering cholesterol, controlling blood sugar and maintaining a healthy weight.

Recipes

Basics of cooking and recipes with sweet potatoes: extension.purdue.edu/foodlink/food.php?food=sweet%20potato
General information on selecting, pairing, preparing, and storing. Also includes a list of recipes.

Video on sweet potato cutting techniques: youtu.be/udWLu8zYSnl

Ever wondered about the basics of how to use sweet potatoes? Chef Allison Kingery shows a couple of options for preparing this vegetable.

Taste Test Ideas



Sweet Potato Casserole



Baked Sweet Potato Fries



Vegetable Chili

Other websites with many sweet potato recipes:

Oregon State University's Food Hero

foodhero.org/recipes/recipe-categories/sweet-potatoes

Recipes include sweet potato and orange muffins, sweet potato pumpkin soup, and more.

California's Eat Fresh

eatfresh.org/search/find-a-recipe?&keyword=sweet%20potato

Recipes include roasted root vegetables, southwest baked potatoes, oven fries, and more.

Produce for Better Health Foundation

fruitsandveggies.org/fruits-and-veggies/sweet-potato/?view=recipes

Recipes include sweet potato chili, maple pecan stuffed sweet potatoes, and more.

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