



NEXT YEAR PLAN A SWEET HARVEST

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Despite the summer's drought, this was a great growing season for sweet potatoes. While they are tropical plants and typically associated with being grown in more southern climates, many varieties do well here in New England. They are not related to potatoes but rather, morning glories.

Not only are sweet potatoes a highly nutritious vegetable, they are easy to grow with few pests in this area. Native to the Americas, sweet potatoes contain high levels of vitamins A and C along with supplying iron, potassium, and dietary fiber. An average sized sweet potato only has around 120 calories.



Sweet potatoes. Photo by dmp2022

To harvest a good crop, sweet potatoes need a growing season of between 90 and 120 days depending on the variety. My favorite choice is 'Beauregard', which matures in 90 days so if we have a colder than average spring, there is still enough time for a sizeable harvest. 'Georgia Jet'

in another variety that matures in 90 days and 'Centennial' in 100. 'Bush Porto Rico' takes a little longer to mature (110 days) but is a more compact variety for smaller gardens and containers. All of these varieties have dark orange flesh but for those looking for something different, sweet potatoes can be found with white, yellow and even purple flesh.

Rule number one when growing sweet potatoes is to give them enough room to run. Once the warm weather hits, the vigorous vines cover a sizeable area. I planted 12 slips in a 6 by 15-foot bed and they still rambled into neighboring beds and out into the lawn area.

While potatoes are started with pieces of the actual tuber, sweet potatoes are started from slips, which are basically cuttings off a mother plant with a small amount of root and a few leaves. The sweet potatoes that we eat are the plant's tuberous roots.

Being of southern origin, sweet potatoes can take the heat and even some drought and need to be grown in a sunny site with well-draining soil. If your soil is on the sandy side, so much the better as well-aerated soils promote the formation of more roots. I grow them in a slightly raised bed but have seen directions for creating small mounds to grow them in if your soil is rocky or compacted.

Not many garden centers carry edible sweet potato slips or plants so your best bet would be to order them from a seed/plant company online. Order early, like in January, to ensure you get the variety you want. A dozen slips will easily feed a family of four and usually that is the smallest amount one can order. When the slips come in, place them in a container of water for a day or two to hydrate them before planting.

Hopefully the arrival of your sweet potato slips will coincide with good planting weather. Ideally they should be planted 3 or 4 weeks after the last spring frost or when the soils warms up to 65 degrees F. I have held them for a week all together in a pot with some soilless media in a bright but not full sun window.

Plant the slips deep enough to cover the roots, usually 6 inches deep or so. Space plants about 30 inches apart to allow plenty of room for tuberous root formation. Plants could be watered in with a high phosphorus liquid fertilizer. Keep them moist for the first two weeks to ensure good root establishment. After that, water when the soil dries out and no rain is predicted. Avoid planting in soils that have recently had manure added. Do not overfertilize with nitrogen as plants may produce lots of foliage and not a lot of sweet potatoes.

Harvest after the frost starts to blacken the foliage. Cut back the vines and gingerly start digging with a trowel or small shovel about 18 inches from plant crowns. The crowns can be tugged upon and if the soil is loose, where the sweet potatoes are is often obvious and they can be removed from the soil.

While some sources say not to wash them, this year with all the rain made them pretty muddy so I washed them off and set them in the sun to dry. Try not to bruise them and store in a humid place around 55 degrees F. Curing at 80 degrees and high humidity for 10 days is suggested to improve storage but it would be hard to find these conditions during a New England fall.

If you have questions about growing sweet potatoes or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.