

Sweet Potatoes for the Mid-Columbia



Sweet potatoes are part of the morning glory family (*Ipomoea batatas*) and are native to the American tropics. Not to be confused with yams, which are an entirely different plant. ❖ Sweet potatoes come in a variety of colors and textures. Some may be orange, yellow or white and have either moist or dry texture. ❖ Until recently, only southern gardeners were able to grow these long season vegetables, but now new varieties and growing practices are giving northern gardeners a great chance at growing these vitamin packed vegetables.

1 How to start Sweet potatoes

Sweet potatoes can be started by yourself from untreated sweet potatoes and growing the slips in a warm (75 degrees) location. The varieties are very limited because the finished potato varieties are limited in our area. The other method is to buy slips already started. The slips arrive in the nursery at the end of April just in time for planting. The varieties are many and the days to harvest can be customized to your area.



2 Growing sweet potatoes

First, the soil must be right. A moderately fertile, sandy loam is best for growth. Hard, compact soil will produce distorted, stringy and misshapened potatoes. A balanced fertilizer applied a week or two before planting allows the nutrients get into the soil. This is the only fertilizer that is needed.

Sweet potatoes grow best on a ridge about 12" high and planted approximately 12-18" apart. The rows should be 36-40" apart. The soil temperature should be warm, above 65 degrees and all danger of frost is past. Use a dowel to make holes and fill with water. Set the slips about 1/2 their length into the holes and water well. Keep watered well the first week until roots get established. Reduce watering at the end of the growing season to prevent splitting.

3 Harvesting

The longer they grow, the sweeter they become, so just before frost tear off the vines and using a fork, so not to bruise the potatoes, start digging for gold!

Once the potatoes are out of the ground, they need to be washed, dried and stored.

Spread your freshly dug potatoes on the lawn and spray with garden hose and let dry 4-5 hours. At this time put them in shallow containers (for good air circulation) and put them in a shed or garage for 10 days to allow them to cure. They will reduce in moisture and toughen the skins for better storage. After they cure, store them in boxes, in a dry, well ventilated, cool area, about 60 degrees is ideal. These potatoes will store for about nine months.