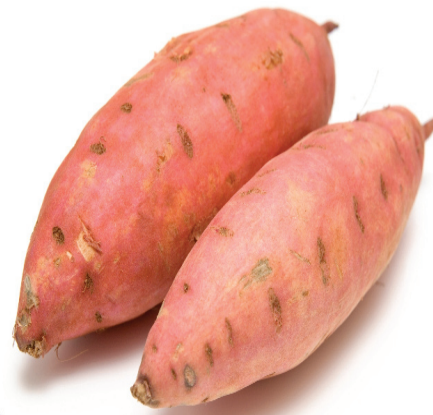


# SWEET POTATO

Gardening tips provided by  
Jefferson Farm & Gardens



## Overview

The sweet potato, *Ipomoea batatas*, is a warm season vegetable of the morning glory family and is related to morning glories and bindweed. Sweet potatoes range in color from white to a dark orange and are confused with yams. The dark orange potato that is roasted for Thanksgiving dishes is indeed a sweet potato and is not even related to the yam, which has more starch and is less sweet. Yellow and orange-fleshed sweet potatoes are rich in vitamins A and C and carbohydrates.

## Choosing Varieties

There are different varieties of sweet potatoes available that differ in days till maturity, growth habit, and flesh color, as well as other traits. A few recommended varieties for Missouri and other Midwest states are:

- Beauregard (early, high yields)
- Bush Porto Rico (bush type)
- Centennial (early, moist texture)
- Georgia Jet (high yields, stores well)

It is recommended to try a few varieties to determine overall plant performance and personal preference.

## Planting Tips

The sweet potato is a warm, long season vegetable and performs poorly in cool, wet weather.

Sweet potatoes grown from transplants are called slips, which prevent the transfer of disease from the root to new plants. Slips can be purchased or grown. An easy way to grow a few slips is to set a seed sweet potato about 2 inches deep in moist sand in a warm, sunny room. The bed of sand should be watered regularly to prevent the sweet potato from drying out. After about 6 weeks, when sprouts have developed at least 6 leaves, the shoot along with the new root system can be gently pulled from the parent sweet potato.

In Missouri, slips can be planted in mid-to-late May after the soil temperatures are warm and the threat of a frost has past. Slips can be planted about a foot apart on a ridge about 1 foot high to improve soil drainage. The ridges

should be about 3 feet apart. Slips should be watered after transplanting to promote good contact between the soil and roots.

## Soil Fertility and Pest Control

Sweet potato slips need a loose well-drained soil for proper formation of roots. Heavier clay soils can be amended with compost to prevent misshapen, stringy roots. Sweet potatoes would benefit from the addition of nutrients either in the form of a complete fertilizer or aged compost. However, excessive amounts of nitrogen promote vine growth, resulting in poor root formation. Sweet potatoes prefer hot, dry weather once vines have covered the ground.

Flea beetles can cause damage to young seedlings by feeding on foliage. Chemicals containing the organic compound pyrethrin can be used to control an infestation of flea beetles (be sure to follow product labels). The tortoise beetle can also cause a problem by feeding on foliage and can be controlled with an inorganic insect spray such as Sevin.

To prevent black rot (starts as black spots on the base of stems) and scurf (black discoloration on roots), be sure to buy disease-free slips and seed sweet potatoes as well as disease resistant varieties. Sweet potato plantings should be rotated with other crops each year to avoid build up of soil borne diseases and pests.

## Harvesting

On average, sweet potatoes need at least 130 days after planting to produce high yields, but smaller roots can be harvested and used before then. Sweet potatoes should be dug before a freeze because temperatures below 50°F can cause injury to roots. Take care when digging roots so not to bruise or knick them. Excess soil can be removed after the roots have dried.

To cure the roots for storage, they can be stacked in crates that are covered with paper or heavy cloth to keep humidity high by a furnace for about 2-3 weeks. Only roots that are healthy and spot-free should be put in long-term storage. After curing, they should be moved to a dark room that is kept at a constant temperature of 55-60°F.

### **Seed Sources**

Slips or bare roots can be ordered from mail order companies via phone or website. Burpee Seeds (1-800-888-1447, burpee.com) and Steele Plant Company, Inc. (1-731-648-5476, sweetpotatoplant.com) are two companies that sell sweet potato varieties.

*Written by Catherine Bohnert, Horticulture Specialist. Additional guidesheets at [www.jeffersonfarm.org](http://www.jeffersonfarm.org). Copyright 2008.*