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# How to Grow Sweet Potatoes: The Complete Guide

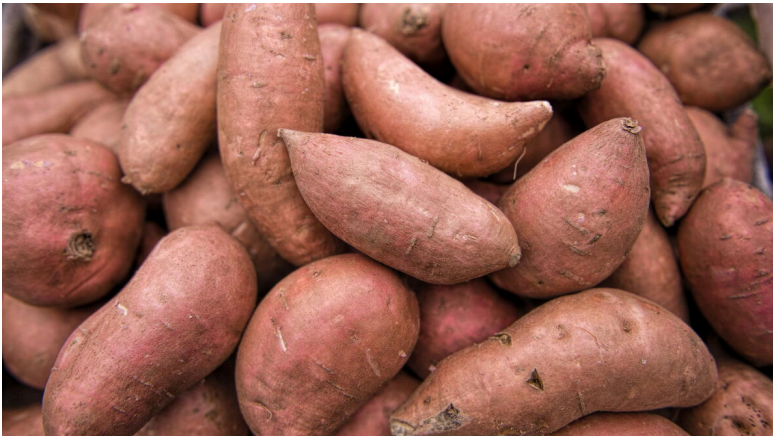


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# Planting, Growing, and Harvesting Sweet Potatoes

By [Catherine Boeckmann](#)  
Last Updated: April 30, 2025




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A few sweet potato plants can produce a generous harvest! This nutritious, sweet-tasting root vegetable is heat-tolerant and pest-re-

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Though commonly grown in the South because they require warm weather, northern regions can have success, too. See our advice on which varieties to choose below.

## About Sweet Potatoes

The sweet potato is a tropical plant and is actually a member of the [Morning Glory family](#). Compare a sweet potato vine's foliage and flowers to those of morning glory, and you'll see the family resemblance! Despite their name, they are not related to [potatoes](#), which are in the nightshade family. Another difference between sweet potatoes and "standard" potatoes is that the edible portion of the sweet potato is a tuberous root, not a true tuber (which are technically modified plant stems).

This root vegetable has deep-orange flesh and a coppery skin jacket. Sweet potatoes are commonly served cooked in mashed form or roasted whole. They may also be used as [pie filling](#).

## ADVERTISEMENT



*Photo Credit: Brent  
Hofacker/Shutterstock*

This tropical crop needs at least 4 months of warm weather and warm soil, but they are drought- and heat-tolerant and have few pests or diseases. Although traditionally more of a Southern crop, there are many short-season sweet potato varieties today. They will grow in the North (even parts of Canada!) when grown in sandy soil or raised beds mulched with black plastic to keep the soil warm.

## Sweet Potato Slips

Note that sweet potatoes are not grown from

Slips are often available at local garden centers and nurseries, from local farmers (such as farmers' markets), or mail-order companies. Or you can start your own (see below).

Before you order slips, please make sure that you have a long enough growing season to grow sweet potatoes. Most varieties will take about 90 to 120 days to mature. [See your frost dates and length of growing season](#). Also, ensure you time your order with your planting dates in mind!

#### Read Next

- [Growing Sweet Potatoes](#)
- [How Are Yams and Sweet Potatoes Different?](#)
- [How to Grow Potatoes: The Complete Guide](#)

## PLANTING

Choose a sunny spot with well-draining soil. Sweet potatoes aren't too picky, but they do prefer soil on the sandier side. They need plenty of air space in the soil for roots to reach down. Consider growing in raised beds if your soil is clay, rocky, or compacted.

down to 8 to 10 inches. Avoid adding animal manure, including pelleted chicken manure; it can result in spindly and/or stained roots. Also, avoid heavy nitrogen fertilizers, which produce lush leaf growth at the expense of the edible roots!

## When to Plant Sweet Potatoes

- Plant slips outdoors, **3 to 4 weeks after your last spring frost or once the soil has warmed to at least 65°F (18°C)**. Nighttime temperatures should be at least 55°F (13°C). The trick is to plant them early enough to have time to mature fully, but not so early that they get killed by a late spring frost.
- Be sure to protect young sweet potatoes from late frosts or cool nights (lower than 55°F/13°C), as they are very tender. Cover them with plastic milk jugs or use row covers, removing the covers during the day.
- If you ordered slips from a mail-order source, unpack them right away. Stick the roots in water for a day or so, and they'll perk up. Plant them as soon as conditions are right.



*Sweet potatoes are grown from slips—sprouts grown from existing potatoes!*  
*Credit: Lex20/Getty Images.*

## How to Grow Your Own Sweet Potato Slips

You can start your own slips instead of buying them, but it's more work. Here's how:

- About 8 weeks before your last spring frost date, look for unblemished, smooth, organic sweet potatoes at the store or farmers market. Be sure to ask about the variety and check that it's one you want to grow.
- Place the whole sweet potatoes in pots or bins that contain at least 3 inches of light, organic, well-draining soil. Leave an inch or two of space between each

- Lightly cover with a few inches of additional soil. Water now and as needed to keep soil damp but not soggy.
- Maintain the soil and the room at 75°F to 80°F in sunlight or under artificial lights. Use a heating mat if necessary; sweet potatoes respond well to warm temperatures.
- Soon, slips (shoots) will emerge from the soil.
- After about 6 to 8 weeks, the slips should be between 6 and 12 inches long, with a number of leaves and roots.
- Remove the slips from the sweet potatoes with roots attached. (If no roots have formed on the slip itself, remove the slip and place it in water; roots should appear in 1 to 2 weeks.)
- If it is still too soon to plant outdoors, stand the slips in potting mix or sand and keep them moist until the right planting time (3 to 4 weeks after the last frost).
- Harden off the slips (before planting outdoors) for 1 to 2 weeks by exposing them to filtered sunlight outdoors during the day.

## How to Plant Sweet Potatoes

- Create raised mounds 6 to 8 inches tall



- Plan 3 feet between mounds so there is enough space for vines to run.
- Plant the slips on a warm, overcast day when the soil temperature has reached 60°F (15°C).
- Break off the lower leaves, leaving only the top ones.
- Set the slips deep enough to cover the roots and the stem up to the leaves. Sweet potatoes will form on the nodes.
- Water with a high-phosphorus liquid fertilizer, then water generously for 7 to 10 days to make sure that the plants root well.

## GROWING

- Side-dress the sweet potato plants 3 to 4 weeks after transplanting with 5-10-10 fertilizer. If you have sandy soil, use more.
- Weed the sweet potato beds regularly, starting 2 weeks after planting.
- Avoid deep digging with a hoe or other tool that disturbs the delicate feeder roots.
- Water regularly, especially during mid-summer. Deep watering in hot, dry periods will help to increase yields.
- Do not prune sweet potato vines: they

- Late in the season, reduce watering to avoid cracking of the sweet's skin—a problem in storage.



*We think sweet potatoes make a nice ground cover, too!*  
*Credit: Getty Images.*

## Growing Sweet Potatoes in Containers

Bush-type sweet potato plants are ideal for container growers. The vines that they produce are short and compact, not sprawling like typical sweets—but the roots are full size, not miniatures.

While slips mature, prepare a large container or tub. (A too-small container can result in small, curly sweets or fewer than hoped for.)

A 10-gallon container can support two or three sweet potatoes; a 20-gallon one, four to six. A half-barrel container (20 to 25 gallons) is ideal. Place the container where it will receive full sunlight every day. (It will be heavy

Sweets like moist but not wet soil; the medium must be well-draining and rich; sweets are also heavy feeders. Provide potting mix amended with compost, sand, bonemeal (for potassium), and wood ash (for potash). Minimize nitrogen or risk producing heavily leafy tops and spindly roots. If you purchase a bush variety, soak the roots in water for a few hours before planting.

Plant slips 3 to 4 weeks after the last spring frost, when the soil has warmed to 65°F and nighttime temperatures are at least 55°F.

Mulch with black plastic before and during the season, if necessary, to capture or retain heat. Set slips 4 inches deep on a bed of compost, then cover up to their bottom leaves.

Water with a high-phosphorus liquid fertilizer (5-10-10) for 7 to 10 days to ensure that the plants root well.

## Types

The fastest-growing sweet potato varieties have orange flesh, but you might also consider varieties with white, yellow, or even purple flesh. Note that orange-flesh varieties cook up moist; white and yellow sweet potatoes become creamy; purple sweets are dry and starchy.

- **'Beauregard'** (90 days) originally comes from Louisiana, but grows well in the North, too. It has dark red roots, dark orange flesh, and stores well.
- **'Bush Porto Rico'** (110 days) is good for small gardens and for baking.
- **'Centennial'** (100 days) is the leading variety in the U.S. It is carrot-colored and has a good storage life; good producer for northern growers.
- **'Georgia Jet'** (90 days) has red skin that covers moist, deep orange flesh. It is an extremely fast-growing type; good for the North.
- **'Jewel'** (120 days) has copper-colored skin and orange flesh; disease-resistant; stores well.
- **'Stokes'** (120 days) offers a vibrant purple color and is full of extra health benefits;

- **‘Vardaman’** (110 days) is a bush type and good for small gardens; it has unique blue/purple foliage, golden skin, and red-dish-orange flesh; stores well.
- **‘White Yam’** (aka **‘White Triumph’**)(100 days)has white skin covering dry white flesh; one of the oldest sweet potato varieties; has compact vines.

## HARVESTING

- You can start digging up the roots when they are big enough for a meal.
- Harvest when the leaves and ends of the vines have started turning yellow or about 100 days from planting.
- Loosen the soil around each plant (18 inches around, 4 to 6 inches deep) to avoid injuring the roots. Cut away some of the vines.
- Pull up the plant’s primary crown and dig the roots by hand. Handle the sweet potatoes carefully, as they bruise easily.
- Shake off any excess dirt; do not wash the roots.
- Complete harvesting by the first fall frost.



## How to Cure and Store Sweet Potatoes

- Curing sweet potatoes gives them a sweet taste and also allows a second skin to form over scratches and bruises.
- Handle sweet potatoes carefully; they bruise easily.
- To cure, store roots in a warm place (about 80°F) at high humidity (about 90%) for 10 to 14 days. A table outside in a shady spot works well. Arrange sweet potatoes so that they are not touching.
- After curing, discard bruised sweet potatoes, then wrap each one in newspaper.
- Carefully pack in a wooden box or basket. Store in a root cellar, basement, or the like with a high humidity at 55° to 60°F.
- The roots should last in storage for about 6 months.



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PESTS/DISEASES

Sweet Potato Pests and Diseases

Pest/Disease	Type	Symptoms	Control/Prevention
<u>Flea beetles</u>	Insect	Numerous tiny holes in leaves	Use row covers; mulch heavily; add native plants to invite beneficial insects
<b>Fusarium wilt (stem rot)</b>	Fungus	Yellow/puckered leaves; older leaves drop; wilting vines; plants eventually die; stems under-/near ground may appear slightly blue; stem cross section	Destroy infected plants; choose certified, disease-free slips and resistant varieties; rotate crops

Pest/Disease	Type	Symptoms	Control/Prevention
		pecially near ground	
<b>Sweet potato scurf</b>	Fungus	Skin-deep, dark brown/black spots or blotches on root tuber that may enlarge in storage; roots may shrivel; reduced shelf life	Choose certified disease-free plants or use vine cuttings or sprouts cut at least 1 inch above soil line; disinfect tools and storage containers; rotate crops
<b>White rust</b>	Fungus	Chalk-white blisters mainly on leaf undersides; small, yellow-green spots or blisters, sometimes in circular arrangement, on upper leaf surfaces; possible distortion or galls; flowers/stems may also be infected	Destroy infected plants; choose resistant varieties; weed; destroy crop residue; rotate crops
<u><b>Whiteflies</b></u>	Insect	Sticky “honeydew” (excrement); sooty, black mold; yellow/ silver areas on leaves; wilted/stunted plants; distortion; adults fly if disturbed; some	Remove infested leaves/plants; use handheld vacuum to remove pests; spray water on leaf undersides in morning/evening to knock off pests; monitor adults with



Pest/Disease	Type	Symptoms	Control/Prevention
			beneficial insects and hummingbirds with native plants; weed; use reflective mulch

## WIT AND WISDOM

- Sweet potatoes are a very healthy root vegetable with many benefits. [Here's why you should eat sweet potatoes.](#)
- They were used in folk remedies to treat asthma, night blindness, and diarrhea.
- [Sweet potatoes are not yams](#), which are related to grasses and lilies. They're also not related to regular white potatoes, which belong to the nightshade family, versus the morning glory family. As mentioned above, potatoes' edible portion is a true tuber, while sweet potatoes produce tuberous roots.

## RECIPES

SWEET POTATO SOUFFLÉ

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**PORK AND SWEET POTATO STIR-FRY**

**SWEET POTATO BISCUITS**

**PECAN-CRUSTED SWEET POTATO  
CASSEROLE**

## COOKING NOTES

Relatively low in calories, sweet potatoes are very nutritious, a top source of beta-carotene, and contain some protein, calcium, iron, vitamins A and C, and other minerals. They can be stored longer than winter squash.

To cook, sweet potatoes are easier than pie (or [sweet potato pie](#)!).

- They can be scrubbed, poked with a fork in a few places, and baked at 400°F for 35 minutes to 1 hour, until they give a bit when you squeeze them in your pot-holder-protected hand.
- In the microwave, a whole sweet potato baked on high should be ready in 4 to 6 minutes. It may still feel firm when done.

- Sweet potatoes can also be steamed whole (cleaned and unpeeled) for about 40 minutes or until tender or cooked whole (cleaned and unpeeled) in boiling salted water for about 35 minutes. (Boiling reduces the flavor considerably.)
- Immerse cut raw sweet potatoes in water until you're ready to cook them; they will darken otherwise.

As a general rule, don't substitute sweet potatoes for regular [potatoes](#) in recipes; the two aren't related. Sweet potatoes don't hold together the way potatoes do, and their strong flavor can overwhelm a dish meant for a milder potato taste. [Sweet potatoes are also not related to yams](#). But they make a fine substitute for [pumpkin](#), especially in desserts.

Check out our [ten best sweet potato recipes](#)!

**VEGETABLES**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Catherine Boeckmann**



Catherine Boeckmann loves nature,

She leads digital content for the Almanac website, and is also a certified master gardener in the state of Indiana. [Read More from Catherine Boeckmann](#)

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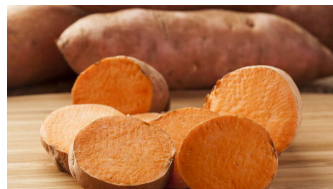
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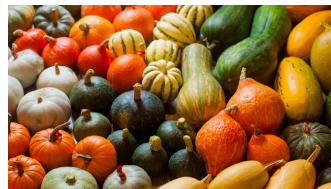
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## COMMENTS

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**e (not verified)** 10 months 3 weeks ago

How do you deal with gold beetles eating your plants?

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[REPLY](#)

**The Editors** 10 months 3 weeks ago

Golden beetles, also known as tortoise beetles, are best controlled by hand picking off of plants. Also, make sure your planting area is free of weeds and that

are excessive, they will not cause significant damage to your sweet potatoes.

REPLY

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**Neesa (not verified)** 11 months 3 weeks ago

If using a raised bed, how tall/wide should it be?

REPLY

**The Editors** 11 months 3 weeks ago

Raised beds are a great idea if you have clay soil or drainage problems. They should be 8 to 10 inches high.

REPLY

---

**Lisa Sharpe (not verified)** 1 year 1 month ago

My sweet potato slips are doing great, in fact a little too great. Some vines are getting quite long and it's still 5-6 weeks until I put them in the ground.

Allowing 2 weeks to root, I still have 3-4 weeks with them growing. Can I trim them back now before I root them?

**The Editors** 1 year 1 month ago

Hi Lisa,

Glad to hear your sweet potato slips are doing so well! You want your slips to be about 6 to 12 inches tall when you begin the rooting process. If yours are much longer than that, you can certainly trim them back (do so below a node). But, if your slips are long enough, you can also divide them into multiple sections to root. If they are leggy and thin, it might be best to cut back to where the slips are thicker and more firm and just root those ones.

**REPLY**

---

**Del Bromm (not verified)** 1 year 2 months ago

We have what is called an 'Old Fashioned German WHITE Sweet Potato'. However, I see nothing in your article relating to these. The texture is between a regular Irish White potato and what we consider a Yam/sweet potato in Southern Indiana. Any thoughts on this. We like these much better than the Orange/soft textured type. They also hold up much better being baked/roasted and are difficult to find. I propagate from previous year's potato

[REPLY](#)

---

**Melissa (not verified)** 1 year 2 months ago

Do sweet potatoes produce only at the base of the plant? Or do they also produce along the vine if they are allowed to touch and root?

I have options for vertical gardening or ground, but I need to know if I'll sacrifice production or waste ground space.

[REPLY](#)

**The Editors** 1 year 2 months ago

Hi, Melissa. You are correct in thinking if any nodes on the vine touch the ground and root, another sweet potato plant will grow. It's best to keep that from happening, allowing the plant to put all of its energy into the original planting.

[REPLY](#)

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**Barbara Normandin (not verified)** 1 year 9 months ago

My sweet potato plant isn't getting enough sun



REPLY

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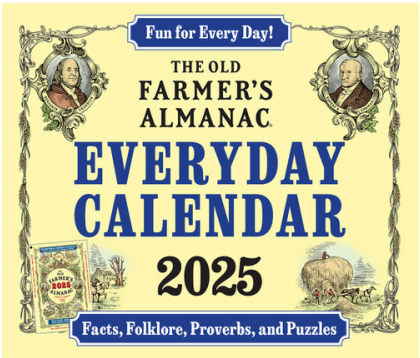
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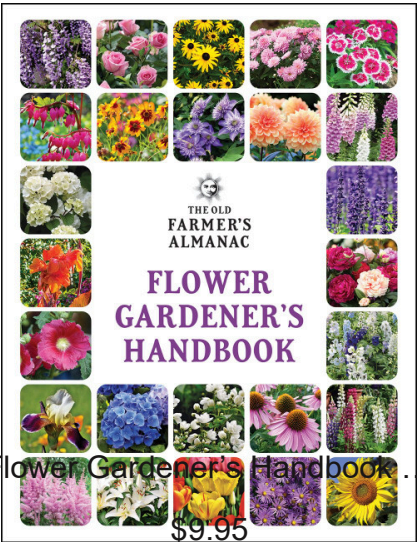
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