

Sweet Potatoes

The sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*) belongs to the family Convolvulaceae. Its large, starchy, sweet-tasting, tuberous roots are a root vegetable. The young leaves and shoots are sometimes eaten as greens. *Ipomoea batatas* is native to the tropical regions in America. It is only distantly related to the potato (*Solanum tuberosum*). And does not belong to the nightshade family. The genus *Ipomoea* that contains the sweet potato also includes morning glories. Although the sweet potato is often called a "yam" in parts of North America, it is botanically very distinct from a genuine yam (*Dioscorea*), which is native to Africa and Asia.

The origin and domestication of the sweet potato is thought to be in either Central or South America. Peruvian sweet potato remnants dating as far back as 8000 BC have been found. They are now cultivated throughout tropical and warm temperate regions wherever there is sufficient water to support their growth. In the U.S., North Carolina is the leading state in sweet potato production.

Sweet potatoes have been an important part of the diet in the U.S. for most of its history, especially in the Southeast. The Center for Science in the Public Interest has compared the nutritional value of sweet potatoes to other foods. Considering the fiber content, complex carbohydrates, protein, vitamin A and potassium, the sweet potato ranked highest in nutritional value.

In the Southeastern U.S., sweet potatoes are traditionally cured to improve storage, flavor and nutrition and to allow wounds on the periderm of the harvested root to heal. Proper curing requires drying the freshly dug roots on the ground for 2-3 hours, then storage at 85-90 degrees F with 90-95% humidity from 5-14 days. Cured sweet potatoes can keep for 13 months when stored at 55-59 degrees F with 90% humidity.

Nonculinary Use

In S. America, the juice of red sweet potatoes is combined with lime juice to make a dye for cloth. By varying the proportions of the juices, every shade from pink to black can be obtained.

All parts of the plant are used for animal feed.

Some varieties of sweet potato are cultivated in gardens as ornamentals.

Researchers at N.C. State Univ. are breeding varieties for use as biofuel.

Cuttings of the vine will rapidly form roots in water and will grow in it, indefinitely, in good lighting with a steady supply of nutrients. For this reason, the vine is ideal for use in home aquariums, trailing out of the water with its roots submerged, as rapid growth is fueled by toxic ammonia and nitrates, a waste product of aquatic life, which it removes from the water. This improves the living conditions for fish, which also find refuge in the vast root systems.