Sweet ‘Taters’

Sweetpotatoes, or ‘sweet ‘taters’ as many South Carolinians refer to them, have risen from the dirt as a ‘superfood’ due to their high levels of vitamins A & C, antioxidants, and low glycemic impact. These easy to grow root vegetables can be stored for months in a cool dry pantry without losing their flavor. Sweetpotatoes are popular around the globe, but Southern gardeners will love this versatile, easy to grow, sweet vegetable.

Sweetpotatoes (Ipomea batatas) are related to several ornamental vines including common morning glory (I. tricolor), firecracker vine (I. lobata), and moonvine (I. alba), as well as about 500 other species. In fact, there are now many sweetpotato cultivars used as ornamental annuals in the horticulture industry, including ‘Blackie’ and ‘Pink Frost’. However, these varieties are prized for their foliage and not for edible potatoes.

Since I have limited space for a vegetable garden at home, I have opted to grow less colorful, but tastier, edible sweetpotatoes in my front yard. Clemson Extension recommends these cultivars for producing sweetpotatoes in South Carolina: ‘Beauregard’, ‘Hernandez’, ‘Jewel’, ‘Covington’, and the white-fleshed ‘Bonita’.

Sweetpotatoes are typically started as rooted cuttings planted when soil temperatures warm to 65 °F or above, usually in mid-May and early June. However, potted transplants are more widely available and more cost effective if you only need a few plants. Purchase either from local feed and seed stores, nurseries, or reputable online retailers. Once sweetpotatoes have been planted, the tips of the vines can always be cut (10-12 inches long) and rooted to give rise to new plant.

Sweetpotato (Ipomea batatas) rooted cuttings are commonly referred to as “slips”.

Shortly after planting, sweetpotato vines provide an excellent ground cover that can shade out weeds in a garden for the duration of the summer. The tender tips of the vines can also be added to dishes as a braising green that is packed with vitamins.
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Even edible sweetpotatoes are showy in late summer or early fall, when pink, purple or white flowers add color to the vegetable garden or landscape. Sweetpotatoes are ready to be harvested when the vines begin to die back or just before the first frost. Once the potatoes are harvested, the vines can be added to any compost pile, where they will add both nitrogen and carbon to the heap.

Sweetpotatoes should be cured before they are eaten to develop their sweet flavor. The curing process allows enzymes to convert starch to sugar, which makes the potatoes sweeter and store longer. Store dry sweetpotatoes in a warm, humid environment for 8 to 10 days followed by storage in a cool room at 55 to 65 °F, for 6-8 weeks.

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