



Sweet Potatoes

Sweet potatoes are a very nutritious, rewarding vegetable crop to grow in Central Texas. They require at least 4 months of warm weather to mature. Unlike Irish potatoes, which are actually underground stems, sweet potatoes are the true root of the plant. Sweet potatoes are grown from “slips,” which are small, bare-root transplants. Therefore, it is best to have the garden soil prepared and ready before purchasing these tender slips. Ideally, plant your slips as soon as possible after purchase.

It is normal for the slips to be wilted. Our sweet potato supplier says that “plants will succeed even if they are yellow, slimy, and have an odor that is almost unbearable. Sweet potato plants are tough and strong and most of them will survive if they are “set” properly and have a good growing climate.” To store your slips for a while before planting, unwrap the roots. Remove any dead or yellow leaves and rinse any slime off of the roots. Do not wet the stem or leaves. Gently re-wrap the bundle of roots in wet sphagnum moss or paper towels and keep the roots moist. Add seaweed solution to the roots for stress relief and to stimulate rooting.

Sweet potatoes need rich, deep, well-drained soil. If your native soil is *rocky and shallow*, build a raised bed with quality prepared soil at least 8 to 12 inches deep. If your native soil is heavy *clay*, you may also make a raised bed. Or amend the clay soil with at least 4 inches of compost mixed into a depth of 8 to 12 inches. To further improve drainage, add another inch or so of prepared soil or expanded shale. At the same time, mix in a dry organic fertilizer. Avoid high nitrogen fertilizers.

The slips should be planted 8 – 14 inches apart. Examine each plant and bury the bottom portion of the stem where the roots are visible. Be sure to allow 3 – 4 leaves to remain above the soil line. Each slip will be planted about 3 – 5” deep. Press the soil firmly but gently around each plant and water immediately. Following with a drench of seaweed solution will get them off to a good start. Add a 3-inch layer of mulch over the bare soil. Water generously for the first few days. After the plants are established (the leaves have begun growing vigorously), the plant is fairly drought tolerant. They are also very heat tolerant. Keep the soil evenly moist, but not soggy. Scratch in fertilizer again every 4 – 6 weeks.

Sweet potatoes will keep growing as long as the weather is warm. The tops do not die back to indicate harvest time as with Irish potatoes. Therefore, keep checking the size of your ‘taters for maturity. Stop watering 2 – 3 weeks before harvest. Be careful when digging so as not to injure the potatoes. Texas A&M says to treat them like eggs. Do not wash the sweet potatoes, and do not leave them in the sun. Harvest on a dry, overcast day if possible. The potatoes need to be cured, unwashed, before consuming to increase their sugar content. Keep them in a warm, dark, and humid (80 – 85°F) location for 7 – 10 days, then consume any injured ones first. Ideally, the sweet potatoes should be stored in a dry, well-ventilated area at 55° to 60° F with a relative humidity of 75 percent to 80 percent. In this way, sweet potatoes can be stored until the next harvest.

Sweet Potato Varieties for Central Texas:

Beauregard - (90 days); Red-orange skin; orange flesh. High yields with little cracking. Consistent in shape; resistant to some of the important sweet potato diseases. Not resistant to nematodes.

Centennial - (100 days); Copper-orange skin; smooth orange flesh with tapered roots. The leading variety is grown in the U.S. High-yielding and a good keeper. Resistant to root-knot nematode and wireworm.

Georgia Jets - (90 days); Red skin; moist, deep orange flesh. Extremely fast-growing type.

Vardaman - (110 days); Golden yellow skin; deep red-orange flesh. Unique purple foliage. High yielding. Smooth, oval roots.