

# SWEET POTATO PLANTING INSTRUCTIONS

## Background

Sweet potato flesh is classified as moist or dry. Moist, deep orange types are sometimes called yams; the most popular varieties for home gardens are moist types. Sweet potatoes are grown worldwide, from tropical regions to temperate climates. This warm-weather crop is remarkably nutritious and versatile. Each fleshy root is rich in vitamins A and C, along with many important minerals. Use them raw, boiled, or baked, in soups, casseroles, desserts, breads, or stir-fries and sweet potato fries.

## How to grow sweet potatoes

It's best to plant root sprouts, called slips, which are available from nurseries and mail-order suppliers. You can grow your own, by saving a few roots from your previous crop. To get you Sweet potatoes to produce sprouts, about six weeks before it's time to plant sweet potatoes outdoors in your area, place the roots in a box of moist sand, sawdust, or chopped leaves in a warm spot (75 to 80 degrees). Shoots will sprout, and when they reach 6 to 9 inches long, cut them off the root. Remove and dispose of the bottom inch from each slip, as that portion sometimes harbors disease organisms.

## Plant spacing and depth

Sweet potatoes mature in 90 to 170 days (September- November) and are extremely frost sensitive. Plant in full sun 3 to 4 weeks after the last frost when the soil has warmed (June). Make holes 6 inches deep and 12-18 inches apart in beds 3 feet apart. Hill your beds to give the plant loose soil to develop, a foot in height is fine. Bury slips up to the top leaves, press the soil down gently but firmly, and water well.

## Care

If you think your plants are getting too hot cover the slips with a pot during its early stages of the plant's life. If you're not using black plastic, mulch the vines 2 weeks after planting to smother weeds, conserve moisture, and keep the soil loose for root development. Occasionally lift longer vines to keep them from rooting at the joints, or they will put their energy into forming many undersized tubers at each rooted area rather than ripening the main crop at the base of the plant. Otherwise, handle plants as little as possible to prevent wounds that might be invaded by disease spores. If the weather is dry, provide 1 inch of water a week until 2 weeks before harvesting, then let the soil dry out a bit. Don't overwater, or the plants—which can withstand dry spells better than rainy ones—may rot.

## Diseases

- **Black rot** is caused by the seed-borne fungus *Ceratocystis fimbriata*. Symptoms include large circular, brownish to black, firm, dry rots on sweet potatoes. In plant beds, symptoms include plant stunting, wilting, yellowing, leaf drop, and plant death. Rots may continue developing in storage. Infected roots have a bitter taste. Management: Avoid infected seed roots. Cut transplants above the soil line. Rotate with other crops in a 2 to 3-year rotation. Treat seed a fungicide.
- **Ring rot** is caused by the common, soil-borne fungus *Pythium* spp., which also parasitizes many other plants. Infected roots have sunken, chocolate colored lesions that tend to extend laterally and often form a ring around the sweet potato. Management: Harvest prior to cool, wet periods.
- **Souring** (Flooding Damage). Sweet potatoes are alive and constantly exchange oxygen and carbon dioxide. In waterlogged fields or airtight curing and storage facilities this cannot occur and roots die because ethyl alcohol accumulates in the root. Decay organisms rapidly invade affected roots. Management: Select well-drained, non-drought-prone fields and provide irrigation when necessary. Ventilate storage and curing facilities with 2 to 4 air exchanges per day and double these rates for curing.

- **Chilling.** Sweet potatoes exposed to temperatures below 55 degrees may appear normal, but internally, the flesh may be spongy with dark vascular elements and latex does not flow. When chilled sweet potatoes are cooked, the central area of the root may be hard. The effects of chilling injury are cumulative with intermittent exposure to low temperatures. Management: Keep storage temperatures above 55 degrees. In late fall, remove roots immediately after digging.

*Disease info credit to and more at [NCsweetpotatoes.com](http://NCsweetpotatoes.com)*

## **Pest**

The northern States don't usually have problems with insect pest like southern states. The plant can outgrow the damage done. During the harvest, you'll likely have to fend-off rodents and other animals. If you see any unwanted harvest by a pest, take it has a sign, your plants are ready. Get them out asap.

## **Harvest**

You can harvest as soon as leaves start to yellow, but the longer a crop is left in the ground, the higher the yield and vitamin content. The leaves of the sweet potato plants are also edible, so you can make some greens while waiting for the tubers to develop. Cold weather will blacken the vines, and tubers will quickly rot. Harvest your sweet potatoes before the end of November or before the ground freezes.

One potato should yield about 12 plants. Use a spading fork or shovel to dig tubers on a sunny day when the soil is dry. Remember that tubers can grow a foot or more from the plant and that any nicks on their tender skins will encourage spoilage. Dry tubers in the sun for several hours, then move them to a well-ventilated spot and keep at 85 to 90 degrees for 10 to 15 days. After they are cured, store at around 55 degrees, with a humidity of 75 to 80 percent. **Properly cured and stored sweet potatoes will keep for several months.**

Keep Growing Detroit (KGD) coordinates these events as a part of the Garden Resource Program. To learn more about the Garden Resource Program, contact us at 313-656-4769, [keepgrowingdetroit.org](http://keepgrowingdetroit.org), or email [info@keepgrowingdetroit.org](mailto:info@keepgrowingdetroit.org). Like us on Instagram or Facebook [@keepgrowingdetroit](https://www.instagram.com/keepgrowingdetroit)

