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GARDEN VEGETABLES

SWEET POTATOES

Sweet potatoes are a warm weather crop that is tolerant of a wide variety of soils, and are grown world-wide. Sweet potatoes are very nutritious, containing large amounts of vitamins and minerals and can be served every way imaginable. If space is limited, sweet potatoes can be grown in containers. The foliage is attractive anyway, and the tubers are easily harvested at the end of the season. Maturity is from 90-150 days.

Planting and Cultivation: Sweet potatoes are best grown in loose friable soil, allowing for constant root growth and easy harvest. pH should be 5.5 to 6.5. Choose a well-drained site with full sun exposure. Incorporate compost to raise the bed and loosen soil. Apply 3.5 lbs. of 5-10-10 fertilizer per 100 feet of row before planting. Use organic fertilizer if possible. More fertilizer is not better! Over-fertilizing will result in lush vines and stunted tubers.

Sweet potatoes are grown from root sprouts called 'slips', which can be picked up at the garden center later in spring, after the danger of frost is past. The slips are best planted on ridges 8-12" high, with 3-4' between rows. Set plants 2-3" deep and 12-16" apart in the rows. (A 10' row should produce 8-10 lbs. of potatoes.)

The rows should be covered in black plastic, or two inches of mulch to smother weeds and conserve moisture. Also this prevents the running vines from rooting at the nodes. If the vines root into the soil at the nodes, they waste energy trying to produce many tiny tubers. Supply sweet potatoes with ample water. This means about 3/4" per week when small and 2" a week when bigger. Stop watering two weeks before harvest.

Harvest and Storage: Sweet potatoes are usually harvested in early October in Central Ohio. If the leaves are just starting to turn yellow, this is a good sign to harvest. Harvest on a warm, sunny day after the first mild frost. Vines should be cut and removed (compost them) ahead of time. Dig the roots carefully with a shovel, hoe or potato fork. After digging, allow roots to dry on the soil.

After allowing to dry on the soil, move potatoes to a room for curing. Do not wash the potatoes. The process of curing converts the bitter juices of the potato to its sweet nature, so this step is important. It also cures any cuts or abrasions on the potato. Find a warm and humid room, shed or other building where a temperature of 85-90 degrees and 90% humidity can be maintained for 5-10 days. After curing, store roots in a cool place (55-60° F) with a high humidity. An unheated part of the basement is an ideal place for storage.