

✧ Renee's Garden ✧

Sweet Potato Growing Guide

Planting

Sweet Potatoes are native to warm tropical climates, so be absolutely sure that both day and night temperatures are above 55°F (13°C), weather is warm and settled, and all danger of frost is past before planting. If consistently warm temperatures are still unpredictable, you can plant slips into slits in black plastic mulch to protect them and help increase soil temperature.

Choose a well-drained area in full sun (at least 6 to 8 hours). **Full sun is non-negotiable** – sweet potatoes must have it! Before planting, dig in compost or other organic material 8-10 inches deep. Sweet potato vines love temperatures 85° or higher – this is a heat-loving crop that tolerates very warm temperatures and high humidity but will grow in average humidity as well.

Plant slips 12-15 inches apart and 2-4 inches deep, so that at least 2 root nodules are buried. Leave 3-3 ½ feet between rows or plant in raised hills 3-4 feet apart. Water and keep soil moist for several weeks after planting.

NOTE: Newly planted sweet potato slips will look stressed and wilted after planting until they

IMPORTANT: Your sweet potato “slips” (sprouts harvested from a mother sweet potato) will probably arrive looking quite wilted and stressed from their journey. They will not have developed roots when you receive them. **DON'T WORRY! THIS IS NORMAL.**

After being planted, each slip will establish and send out strong roots to grow into vigorous lush vines that form multiple tubers underground. If the weather is warm enough, unwrap and plant slips right away for best results. If immediate planting is not an option, keep them moist and cool – but don't put them in water.

If you need to wait more than 1-2 days, fill a shallow pot full of moistened potting mix. Unwrap and tuck in the slips loosely around the perimeter 2 to 3 inches deep. Keep moist and in a warm place out of direct sunlight. You can hold them for a week or two this way. They may begin to sprout roots and leaves, which is not a problem as long as you plant them as soon as the weather is consistently warm both day and night.

establish new roots and are actively growing. This can take several weeks, so don't worry; just keep them moist. If you keep on top of early weeds, the vigorous vines will quickly spread to cover and cloak the ground, eliminating the need to weed them.

Make sure your newly planted sweet potato slips have an inch of water per week while developing. At the end of the season, cut back watering 2-3 weeks before harvesting to reduce cracking and toughen the skins on the tubers underground.

The attractive and vigorous vines can also be trellised up if you want to save space. Sometimes they produce small flowers that look like morning glory blossoms. Sweet potato leaves are edible and can be used in salads or steamed like a vegetable.

Harvesting

NOTE: Sweet potatoes *absolutely* must be harvested before a hard killing frost to avoid deterioration and rot.

In Cold Climates: Stop watering and cut vines back to just a few inches tall 2-3 weeks before you plan to harvest to help tubers dry and mature. An early light frost will not hurt the tubers, but it will kill the vine tops. If this happens, remove the dead foliage and plan to harvest soon.

In Mild Winter Areas: Stop watering and cut back vines to just a few inches tall 2-3 weeks before harvesting in late fall so tubers can dry and mature. Choose a mild dry day for harvesting. Dig tubers carefully with a shovel or fork; cut or damaged tubers will not keep. Do not wash harvested tubers, just let them dry and brush off any clinging soil.

Curing and Conditioning

Getting sweet potatoes ready to eat is a two-step process: They need to cure and then mature and condition in storage in order to be sweet and ready to eat.

First: Cure your harvested tubers for 5-6 days in a warm and humid environment. To achieve this, put dry tubers into plastic grocery bags with holes cut in them which helps preserve humidity. Keep in a shady warm place.

Once cured for 5-6 days, your harvest needs a long, cool storage period of 5-6 weeks to really develop flavor and texture before you start to eat them: **don't neglect this!** Take tubers out of plastic bags if using. Store in a box in shallow layers separated with newspaper out of direct light. This lengthy storage enables harvested sweet potatoes to develop their starches into sugars and creates delicious flavor. Keep in a cool, dry place with temperatures between 55-65°F (13-18°C). Leave sweet potatoes in storage as you gradually use them up. After 6 weeks in storage, your tubers will be sweet, tasty and ready to enjoy!

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