

SWEET POTATOES



Bruce Gravens
Master Gardener

Question: Can I grow sweet potatoes in the Umpqua Valley?

Answer: Yes, but you will have to create a bit of climate change. Sweet potatoes, which are a member of the Morning Glory family, are not at all adapted to the weather in the Umpqua Valley.

They are more suited for the much warmer weather of central California and points south of that. Sweet potatoes are extremely frost sensitive, need warm soil and need a long growing season.

You will need to provide this environment.

The whole sweet potato plant is edible. The leaves are a good spinach substitute and, along with the flowers, they make great additions to a salad. So even if you do not get the big tubers you want, it is still worth the effort. And with care and a long, warm summer, big tubers are very possible.

To grow sweet potatoes in the Umpqua Valley, you want to get your plants going as early as possible and provide cold protection for as long as possible.

Techniques to do this include growing them in black plastic containers, in poly tunnels, in cold frames, against south-facing walls or covering the soil with plastic to increase the warmth.

This is one time that gardening in a fenced city lot has an advantage, as the walls and housing trap the heat and create a warmer environment.

Sweet potatoes need light, highly organic soil that is not too fertile. If the soil is too fertile, the sweet potato plant will not be stimulated to grow big tubers. You will want to keep the soil moist and as warm as possible throughout the season and keep the sweet potato going as long as possible into the fall.

I harvest one or two plants two weeks before Thanksgiving, but let the rest go until the frost and low light levels finally kill the vines. Once the vines die off, you want to harvest and cure the tubers.

According to WebMD, just one sweet potato gives you 400% of the vitamin A. Sweet potatoes are also rich in B vitamins, vitamin C, calcium, iron, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, thiamin and zinc.



PHOTOS BY LINDA THAMES

Once the vines finally die off, you want to harvest all tubers. They will not hold in the soil like Irish potatoes.

Tubers and roots left in the ground will not sprout, so there is no need to try and get everything out.

Sweet potatoes are grown from slips. To get started, you need a sweet potato tuber. Ideally, you can get one from a friend that grows sweet potatoes, a local farmer's market or from the organic part of the grocery store. The standard store sweet potatoes have been treated to delay sprouting, but will sprout eventually.

The basic process is to get your tuber to sprout, remove the sprout and root it and plant the rooted sprout out in your garden. There are two basic techniques. One sprouts the tuber by suspending the tuber in water and rooting the

sprouts in the water. The other does the same thing in soil. I use the soil-based process.

In late January, place the tuber on its side, half buried in moist potting soil. After two to three weeks, it will begin to sprout. Once the sprout gets to about 9 inches high, cut 6 inches off half-way between two leaf nodes. Plant the cutting in a 4-inch pot and

place it in a warm sunny window or greenhouse. Continue this until

you have as many cuttings as you want to plant.

After two weeks, plant your starts out into your garden. Start gathering new sprouts from your tuber and planting them into 4-inch pots to root. These new cuttings will be used to replace any of the planted starts that fail.

Continue this process until your planted-out sweet potatoes are well on their way and the risk of cool weather has past. This process ensures that your sweet potatoes get the earliest start possible.

As you grow out the sweet potatoes, trellis up the vines so they do not root. If the vines root, any tubers will be small. Feel free to harvest some leaves and flowers for salad or cooked greens.

Once the vines finally die off, you want to harvest all tubers. They will not hold in the soil like Irish potatoes.

Now you have to cure the tubers before cooking/storing them. To cure sweet potato tubers, place them in a high humidity environment at around 90 Fahrenheit for four to seven days. You can achieve this in a cooler with a low wattage light.

Monitor the temperature and control the temperature by opening the lid a little. After the tubers are cured, store them in a dry, cool, dark place. I wrap mine in newsprint for storage.

There are a lot of varieties of sweet potatoes to choose from (unlike what you would see from the grocery store offerings) but you have to search them out. Asian grocery stores are a good place to look. You can also buy slips from seed suppliers, but they are expensive.

On the other hand, once you find one you like, you can use your own tubers the following year.

If you have a cold frame, growing sweet potatoes and Irish potatoes in it is a great use of the summer months when it is too hot for most other plants. You can interplant both of these with your winter greens in the very early spring. They will stay small until your winter greens are done and are ready to pull out as your winter greens are ready to go in.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.

