

Growing Your Own

A beginner's guide to gardening

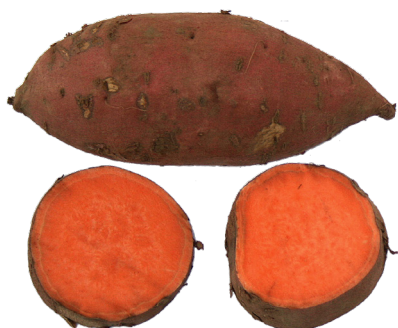
Sweet Potatoes

Add sweet potatoes to your garden this year if you have enough space. Despite what their name suggests, sweet potatoes (sometimes written as the single-word “sweetpotatoes”) are not related to white potatoes. They like to grow in warm weather. They are healthy and a good source of vitamin A and vitamin C.

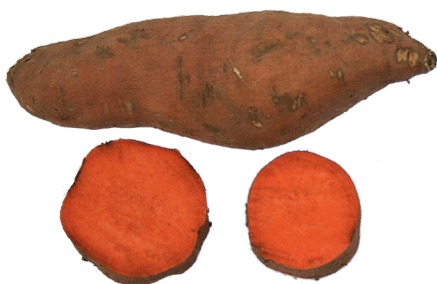
Varieties

The following varieties are known to grow well in Kentucky.

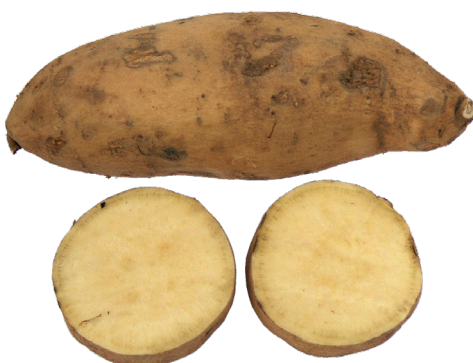
- **Beauregard** has copper skin and deep-orange flesh.
- **Hernandez** has brighter orange skin and colored flesh. It also has a tapered root that can be quite long.
- **O'Henry** is white skinned and has a pale flesh.
- **Japanese/Murasaki** has rare purple skin and a drier, white flesh.
- **Covington** has copper and rose-colored skin with orange flesh.



Beauregard



Hernandez



O'Henry

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Murasaki



Covington

Johnny's Selected Seeds

How much to plant

On average, a 10-foot row will yield at least 10 pounds of sweet potatoes.

How and when to plant

Sweet potatoes are grown from slips, which are plant shoots that grow from one end of a mature sweet potato. You can buy slips or grow them from mature sweet potatoes. Sweet potatoes placed in moist potting soil will often grow slips in a few weeks. You should start them indoors about a month before planting outdoors. Once the slips root, break them off from the sweet potato and move them to the garden when the weather is warm. You can get many slips from one sweet potato. Plant slips 12 to 15 inches apart in 36-inch-wide rows to allow vines to grow.



Slips can grow from a mature sweet potato.
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Region	Transplanting Date
Eastern Kentucky	Mid-June
Central Kentucky	Early June
Western Kentucky	Early June

Once your sweet potatoes are in the ground, they will take 90 to 140 days to mature, based on the variety.

Go easy on the fertilizer. Check with your county Extension agent about doing a soil test. They will give you guidelines to make your soil perfect for sweet potatoes. Too much nitrogen in the soil might lower your yield of sweet potatoes. Follow the guide in [Growing Your Own: Preparing Your Garden \(NEP-219\)](#), and do not add extra nitrogen in the summer. Sweet potatoes favor loose, sandy soil that drains well. Try mounding soil into a hilled row before planting to help with drainage. Ensuring the soil around the sweet potatoes does not dry too much will help prevent the sweet potatoes from splitting.

Pests and diseases

Wireworms can cause problems when growing root vegetables. Wireworms are common when planting in a place where lawn grass was grown previously. Flea beetles can also pose a problem with a sweet potato crop. Flea beetles are insects around one-tenth of an inch long that feed on the leaves and stems of sweet potatoes.

If possible, buy your slips from approved vendors that have certified clean (disease-free) stock. A disease, such as scurf, can be on the slips that you buy and can spread to other sweet potatoes. If you are buying slips from an unreliable source or growing your own slips from mature sweet potatoes, you may get these problems on the plants. Call your local county [Extension](#) office for ways to handle pests.



A close-up photograph of a wireworm.
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Wireworms will eat their way through root vegetables such as sweet potatoes.

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Flea beetles and the damage they cause to plant leaves.
Whitney Cranshaw, Colorado State University, Bugwood.org, CC BY 3.0



Blackened spots show scurf damage on a sweet potato crop.
Charles Averre, North Carolina State University, Bugwood.org, CC BY-NC 3.0



It is helpful to leave sweet potatoes in the field for a couple of hours after harvesting to make sure they dry before curing.
Lance Cheung, USDA, via Flickr

Harvesting

Sweet potatoes will keep growing as long as their vines stay alive. This depends on water and warm weather. The vines will die from frost or by a gardener deciding to harvest the crop. Clip the vines back to soil level before the first frost or when you are ready to harvest. This will make it simpler to harvest the sweet potatoes. Harvest sweet potatoes with a spade, shovel, or hand trowel. The hand trowel may be hard to use, but it is less likely to hurt the sweet potatoes.

Serving

Sweet potatoes are a good source of fiber, complex carbohydrates, and vitamins A and C.

Choose small to medium-sized sweet potatoes with smooth, unbruised skin. Scrub well. Leave whole or peel, then slice, dice, or shred.

Baking: Pierce skin in several places and rub with margarine, if desired. Arrange on a baking sheet in a single layer and bake uncovered at 375 degrees F until soft when squeezed (45 to 60 minutes).

Boiling: In a three-quart pan, boil four whole, medium-sized potatoes, covered in two inches of water, until tender when pierced with a fork or knife. Drain.

Microwaving: Pierce skin and place on a paper towel in microwave. If cooking more than two at a time, arrange like spokes of a wheel. Microwave on high, turning half-way through cooking time. Allow four to five minutes for one potato.

Curing and storing

After harvesting, cure your sweet potatoes for three to five days at 80 degrees F to 85 degrees F in high humidity. The right place can often be found under the shade of a tree on a warm day. Curing the sweet potatoes gives them time to heal any cuts from harvesting and stretches storage time. During this time, sweet potatoes make more sugar, giving them better flavor. After being cured, move the sweet potatoes to an unfinished basement or root cellar. This room should stay around 55 degrees F. Avoid storing at temperatures below 50 degrees F.

Clean up

After the season, make sure to clean up any leftover vegetation from the beds. If your sweet potatoes had any evidence of diseases or pests, don't compost them to avoid spreading the problem to your whole garden.

Authors

Daniel Bowen, Extension Associate

Rick Durham, Extension Consumer

Horticulture Specialist

Rachel Rudolph, Extension Vegetable Specialist

Contributors

Jann Knappage, Food System Specialist

Rita May, Senior Extension Associate

Michele West, Marketing and Social
Media Specialist

Summary

Varieties

There are many varieties of sweet potatoes. Varieties that grow well in Kentucky are Beauregard, Hernandez, O'Henry, Japanese/Murasaki, and Covington.

How much to plant

On average, a 10-foot row of sweet potatoes will yield at least 10 pounds of sweet potatoes.

How and when to plant

Sweet potatoes are grown from slips, which are plant shoots that grow from one end of a mature sweet potato. Plant slips 12 to 15 inches apart in 36-inch-wide rows to allow vines to grow. Once your sweet potatoes are in the ground, they will take 90 to 140 days to mature, based on the variety.

Pest and diseases

Wireworms are pests that can affect sweet potatoes. A disease that affects sweet potatoes is scurf.

Harvesting

Sweet potatoes will keep on growing as long as their vines stay alive. Clip the vines back to soil level before the first frost or when you are ready to harvest. Harvest sweet potatoes with a spade, shovel, or hand trowel.

Serving

Sweet potatoes can be baked, boiled, or microwaved.

Storing

After harvesting, cure sweet potatoes for three to five days at 80 degrees F to 85 degrees F in high humidity. After being cured, move the sweet potatoes to an unfinished basement or root cellar. This room should stay around 55 degrees F and have low humidity.

Clean up

After the season, make sure to clean up any leftover vegetation from the beds.

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Lexington, KY 40506 Issued 07-2023



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