

Growing Sweet Potatoes from Start to Finish

©Pam Dawling 2022 Author of *Sustainable Market Farming* and *The Year-Round Hoophouse*

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Sweet potatoes come from the coastal mountain valleys of Peru and Ecuador. By the 16th century, sweet potatoes were being cultivated in the southern states of what is now the US, where they became a staple in the traditional cuisine.

Planning ahead – how many to plant

- Decide how much space you want to plant, or how many pounds (tons?) you want to grow.
- One slip will produce a cluster of 4–10 roots, each weighing 3–17 oz (80–500 g). Climate, spacing, growing season affect yield.
- Yield range is 2.5- 6.8 lbs (1-3kg) per plant, 276–805 lbs/1,000 ft² (14–40 kg/10 m²), or 6–17.5 tons/ac (13.5-39 t/ha)
- Planting space is 6-18" (15-45 cm) in the row (wide spacing gives more jumbo roots). We do 15" (38 cm) - we like some jumbos.
- Space between rows could be 32-48" (0.8-1.2m). The vines become rampant.
- Calculate how many slips you'll need and add 5-10%. For 600 plants, we save 60-200. For an acre you'll need 15,000.

Timing

- Figure out your ideal planting date and work back to find your starting date.
- Plant out about 2 weeks after the last frost. You need *settled* warm weather. The soil temperature should reach at least 65°F (18.5°C) at 4" (10 cm) deep on 4 consecutive days – don't rush into planting early, or plants will struggle with skin fungi, and give uneven yields.
- We plant May 10, between pepper and okra & watermelon transplanting.
- It takes 7-8 weeks to grow the slips using our slips-in-flats method, and the roots produce more slips if conditioned for 2 weeks (or even 4), before you start to grow slips. So start 10-12 weeks before your planting date.

Four methods of slip production

- 1. Twin Oaks "slips in flats" method** (learned from Hiu Newcomb, Potomac Vegetable Farms). Allows for flexibility about planting dates, and a longer slip-cutting season.

Testing – see Twin Oaks Sweet Potato Plan for 4 March below

- All the sprouts will grow from the stem end, so don't cut there!
- If you can't tell the difference between the ends, ignore this, propagate your own slips for just 2 or 3 years (to keep virus load low).
- If you are a home gardener with a small crop, you could keep the slips from each root separate, and before planting, cut up the mother root and discard the slips from streaked roots.
- Commercial growers could check some, (for seed stock) and plant them in a different plot from the untested market stock.

Conditioning – see Twin Oaks Sweet Potato Plan for 4 March below

- Conditioning after testing allows the cut surfaces to heal before they are covered by compost.
- The environment for sprouting the roots is similar, so you can probably use the same location.

Sprouting – see Twin Oaks Sweet Potato Plan for 18 March below

- Set up a place with light, humidity and ventilation at 75°F-85°F (24°C-29°C) and 12" (30 cm) of headroom. We use our ex-fridge germinator. Using boxes is much more manageable than having the roots loose in a big cold frame.
- The tubers do not need to be fully covered with soil. Water the boxes and put them to sprout.
- Keep the compost damp. If your planting medium is without nutrients, feed occasionally with liquid feed.

Cutting slips see Twin Oaks Sweet Potato Plan for 25 March below

- After 5-7 days, the roots begin to produce slips.
- The spotted flats need good light in a frost-free greenhouse and sufficient water.
- 10 days before planting, start to harden off the flats.

TWIN OAKS SWEET POTATO PLAN

4 March: Pre-sprouting Testing and Conditioning: Test if they float – floaters yield higher and grow better flavor roots. (Optional test for viral streaks: Cut a slice from the distal end (the string root end), not the stem end. Throw out roots with streaks bigger than a pencil lead. Add potatoes from storage if needed. Let cut surfaces heal while conditioning, before planting.) Put the potatoes in flats, without compost, labeled, in the germinator, for 2 weeks. Aim for 75-85°F (24°C–29°C), 95% humidity, good light and ventilation.

3/4/16	Start #	Sinkers	Floaters	Rot	Chimeras	Kept	Notes
Beauregard							
Georgia Jets							
Bill Shane's White							
Jubilee							

18 March: Plant the roots, almost touching each other, horizontally in compost in flats. Water. Put in germinator with shelves 12" (30 cm) apart, (so the shoots have enough head room).

3/18/16	Beauregard	Georgia Jets	Bill Shane's	Jubilee	Notes
# good roots					
# flats of roots					

25 March - mid May, Daily: Cut shoots when they reach 6-12" (15-30 cm) tall and have 4-6 leaves. Cut, rather than pull, in order to reduce chance of spreading disease. Stand the slips in water in small buckets or jugs. Can bundle in rubber bands to help them stand upright.

Weekly from 4/1: Plant the well-rooted slips in 4" (10 cm) 12x24" (30x60 cm) flats of compost, 40 per flat with even spacing. The spotted flats need good light in a frost-free greenhouse, and sufficient water. Label, and keep the varieties separate. Tally the slips.

Date	Cut Today	Beauregard		Georgia Jet		Spotted B+GJ YTD	Cut/Un-spotted B+GJ YTD	Total B+GJYTD	Goal B+GJ	Bill Shane		Jubilee	
		Spot- ted	Not	Spot- ted	Not					Spot- ted	Not	Spot- ted	Not
4/1									80				
4/8									200				
4/15									300				
4/22									400				
4/29									500				
5/6									600				
5/13									640				
5/20									640				
Goal		320 = 8 flats		320 = 8 flats					640	16		16	

Late April: Remove rotten roots. **From approx 29 April** It is possible to cut secondary slips from the older planted slips.

10 May approx: When soil is 65°F at 4" for 4 consecutive days, start planting. Spacing is 16" between plants.

Do two plantings outdoors a week apart, rather than plant out very small slips. In the 3rd week, fill any gaps.

2. Boutard single node cutting method (Anthony Boutard and Caroline Boutard Hunt)

Both this system and our slips-in-flats method start at the same time, by planting tubers in damp compost in a warm greenhouse

Advantages of the Boutard single node cutting method, learned from John Hart of Cornell

- Fewer "mother roots" are needed. 10-20% compared to our slips-in-flats method.
- Smaller plants save on greenhouse space. Only 18 days between cutting nodes and planting in the field.
- Smaller plants as plugs experience less transplanting shock.
- Root production is concentrated – from a single node rather than several.

To prepare single node cuttings

1. Cut a slip from the mother tuber and cut off about 1/4" (6mm) above a leaf node (the swollen point where the leaf emerges).
2. Make the second, lower, cut just above the next node down. Make several cuttings from one slip.
3. In the leaf axil is a bud which will grow a shoot; just below the bud is a ring of cells that can grow roots.
4. Trim back the leaf stem, or leave the leaf on – your choice.
5. 50-cell plug flats work well. If the cutting is too tall to fit your cell plugs, cut more off the lower end.
6. Push the lower end of the cutting into the soil at an angle, creating a V with the leaf stem. The new shoot will easily grow upwards.
7. Keep the trays warm and moist.
8. Plant out after 18 days into well-prepared damp soil. Delaying planting for 10 days or so should not be a problem.

3. Sand Hill Preservation Center field bedding method (Glenn and Linda Drowns)

- They start field beds in late April or early May, their usual last frost date.
- The soil is still too cold for tender sweet potato slips, but they prepare beds by digging a wide trench several inches deep.
- They set the mother roots in it, cover with peat moss and wet it down.
- They cover the beds with clear plastic and wait several weeks.
- If they have warm weather the roots start sending up slips in about 20 days. Cool, cloudy weather means added time, fewer slips - parent roots can rot.
- Glenn says: "Slips set out when the weather is very warm will outgrow and out-produce ones set out a month earlier. A slip set out in cold soil will many times become stunted and not produce as large a yield. I typically . . . get my slips planted . . . 6/20 – 6/25."
- The sweet potatoes are almost all ready to harvest by mid- to late September.

4. Hoophouse or caterpillar tunnel bedding method. Twin Oaks version (from River Oneida)

4 beds 45' (14 m) long with three rows/bed in a single-layer hoophouse produced an average of 4000 slips/week, for a 6 week sales season via Southern Exposure Seed Exchange, with a peak and bell-curve ends of the season.

- Store your mother roots at room temperature. From March 1: start sprouting the sweet potatoes in stages, as heated space permits, at 85°F (29°C), and high humidity. Remove rotting potatoes. When a potato grows 1/4" (6 mm) sprouts, take it out of the heated space and replace with new ones. Put the sprouted ones at room temperature to slow them down for batching.
- In March: Cover the bed area in the hoophouse with a single layer of clear plastic. Kill any weeds that pop up. Four weeks before shipping starts (April 1), prepare the beds. Dig out a flat-bottomed bed 1" (2.5 cm) deep, and set the sprouted sweet potatoes an inch (2.5 cm) apart in rows. One or two sprouts are enough. If possible, don't bed unsprouted roots.
- Spread some compost, not lots. Replace the soil you dug out, on top of the sweet potatoes. Add soil from the aisles, putting 1"-3" (2.5-7.5 cm) of soil on top of the potatoes. Not more. Set out drip tape and irrigate regularly.
- Stab holes in the plastic every 4" (10 cm) for respiration. Check regularly.
- In mid-April or whenever you see slips emerging, remove the plastic in the daytime, but put it back on frosty nights. Add more soil later to cover exposed tubers if needed. Regulate temperature if you want a faster or slower rate of production.
- Slips will be ready from the 3rd or 4th week of April onwards. If too many are ready at any point, pull and heel them in outdoors.

Crop requirements

- Heat is vital. Sweet potatoes prefer loose, well-drained soil with pH of 5.8-6.2. They will tolerate pH from 4.5-7.5.
- Enough potassium (K) is important for drought-resistance, but too much K makes them taste bitter.
- Sweet potatoes do not benefit from high nitrogen (N). They can get plenty from high-biomass cover crops, organic mulch, and soil life.
- As with other crops, a 3- or more year rotation helps control disease.
- Once they are established, sweet potatoes are fairly drought-tolerant. Critical times to maintain sufficient moisture are after transplanting and for at least the first 20-40 days while roots are developing.

Planting out

- We like to do 2 plantings a week apart, using the older slips first, and then make a 3rd visit to fill gaps.
- It's better to wait for the slips to grow 4 leaves or more before planting, rather than rush them outside.
- For big roots, plant the slip vertically. For average size roots but larger crops, plant horizontally 2-3" (5-8 cm) deep.
- Have 3-5 leaf nodes underground and only the tips above the ground – this gives the plants a second chance if frost strikes.
- If you are planting in hot dry weather, water the soil first, and keep the roots enclosed in damp or wet compost as you plant.

Development

- The first month or so after transplanting is the root development stage. Roots can go 8' (2.5 m) deep in 40 days. Don't be alarmed at the lack of above-ground action. Give 1" (2.5 cm) water/week, and cultivate to remove weeds.
- The second month or so is the vine growth stage. The roots begin to store starch and sugar close to the stem base. Cultivate until vines cover the ground, after which very little weeding will be needed.
- During the last month of growth for that variety (3rd or 4th month), the potatoes develop.
- Make sure you dig them up before the soil temperature gets down to 55F (13C). The week of the average first fall frost is about right.
- Most varieties take 90–110 days from planting out to reach a good size, if the weather is warm enough.

Afflictions

- Round chunky roots, low yield, purple color: Planted too early, too cold.
- Low yield: Flooded or crusted soil 6-7 weeks after planting? Planted too early?
- Rough irregular shaped roots: Heavy clay soils or OM above 2%.
- Rattails: thin, tough, tubers caused by hot dry weather, insufficient water.
- Souring: tissue breakdown caused by poor soil aeration; for instance, flooding.
- Water blisters: Small whitish bumps around the lenticels/breathing holes - wet soil.
- Cracking: Uneven water supply or too much late-season water.
- Blister: small raised bumps appearing several months into storage – boron deficiency. Fine hairline cracks: also boron deficiency.
- Long, slender malformed roots, reduced yield: Potassium deficiency.

Diseases

- Brownish skin patches, worse in wet years. Stored roots shrivel. Scurf fungus, *Monilochaetes infuscans*, more likely if too much compost.
- Metallic black surface lesions, maybe covering most of the root: black rot fungus, *Cercosyria fimbriata*. Internal decay is not deep, but the fungus may impart a bitter flavor;
- Sunken brown lesions that may encircle the root: ring rot, *Pythium* fungus;
- Sunken lesions that dry and may fall out: Circular Spot, *Sclerotium rolfsii*. May taste bitter;
- Hard, dry, black, sunken spots in harvest wounds: *Fusarium*. Spots may become larger than 2" (5 cm) diameter, but damage is not deep.
- Pitting: Soil rot or soil pox fungus in the presence of water stress. Roots will be small and malformed. *Streptomyces* causes a similar rot;
- Irregular cracks, browning of the surface; dry, corky, dark-colored clumps of tissue scattered throughout the flesh, becoming worse if roots are stored warmer than 60°F (16°C): russet-crack/internal cork, feathery mottle virus (yellow feathery patterns of leaves).

Harvest planning

- Unlike white potatoes, which have the annual plant sequence of vegetative growth, flowering and dying back, sweet potato plants would go on growing forever if the weather remained warm enough.
- Choose when to dig them, ahead of cold weather. Later means bigger the potatoes, but you are gambling with the weather.

When to harvest

- Usually sweet potatoes are harvested in the week that the first frost typically occurs in your region.
- Aim to harvest on a mild day, above 50°F (10°C), to avoid permanent chilling injury
- If days are warm, a couple of light frosts will not harm your crop. Despite myths, there is no toxin in frozen leaves going to the roots.
- If frost strikes, waste no time – get them harvested within a few days. Roots without leaf cover exposed to cold air temperatures, have lost their method of pulling water up out of the soil, and cold wet soil can quickly rot sweet potatoes.
- Don't wait till soil temperatures have been below 55°F (13°C) for several hours. Cold injury can ruin the crop.
- In drought, irrigate the field before harvest, to avoid scratching the skin with chunks of dry soil.

How to harvest

- Remove the vines from the plants to be harvested that day. If there is more than one day's digging, leave intact vines to protect the rest of the crop. Mowing isn't recommended, as the roots sometimes stick up out of the ground.
- Clip the vines, leaving stumps to show where to dig. Roll the vines into the gaps between the rows –Digging forks can be used for this.
- Mechanical harvesting uses a modified disk or moldboard plow with a spiral attachment. Potato diggers usually do too much damage.
- Hand digging: Using digging forks, carefully dig up the roots, which grow in a bunch-of-bananas shape. Begin 12-18" (30-45 cm) from the center of the plant to avoid damage. Go straight down about 6" (15 cm), then angle toward the center and gently lift the potatoes.
- It's important not to drop, throw or in any other way bruise the roots.
- Avoid any abrasion of the skin, which is very fragile at this stage.

- Set the potatoes out beside the spot they've grown, one clump per plant, to identify the most productive plants, for seed stock.
- Let the tubers dry in the sun for up to an hour, unless the weather is unsuitable. Don't leave roots exposed to temperatures higher than 90°F for more than ½ hour, or they get sun-scald. Below 55°F (13°C), they get chilling injury.

Sorting and crating

1. If you want to grow your own slips next year, select seed potatoes. We grow several different kinds, and make sure not to mix them.
2. Sort storable from damaged roots. Large open broken surfaces will cure and can be stored, but any roots with soft wet damaged areas or deep holes (whether from bugs or fork tines) will not store and should be graded out, for composting or immediate use at home.

Selecting seed potatoes

- Select the best: choose plants with a high yield and no string (rat-tail) roots.
- From these plants, choose medium sized (1½"/4 cm diameter) potatoes with good shape and color.
- Don't save jumbo potatoes for seed, they're harder to deal with, and will not produce more or better crops. Each potato produces about 10-30 slips (shoots), depending how much time you allow, but regardless of size.
- Do not save for seed any roots with disease symptoms. Damage due to poor growing conditions can look like a disease, but as it isn't, it will not carry over to the next crop.
- If you want to be sure to avoid saving roots with color breaks, you can cut a small slice from the distal end (the end distant from the plant) for examination. The cut surface will heal over during curing. Discard any roots with streaks or dots bigger than a pencil lead.

Curing

- Immediately after harvest, field drying, sorting and crating, take the boxes of sweet potatoes into a warm, damp basement or other indoor space to cure.
- Curing allows the skin to thicken, cuts to heal over, and some of the starches to convert to sugars.
- Ideal conditions are 85-90°F (30-33°C), and 80-95% humidity for 4-7 days. Air flow and ventilation needed.
- Curing takes longer if conditions are less than perfect. The time for curing also varies with the dryness of the soil pre-harvest.
- We reckon on 10-14 days. To test if curing is complete, rub two sweet tubers together. If the skins scratch, they need to cure longer.

Storage

- Ideal storage conditions for sweet potatoes are 55-60°F (12-16°C), 60-70% humidity, with one air change each day. Above 60°F (15.5°C) shrinking and sprouting may occur, and below 55°F (12.5°C), permanent chilling injury (Hard Core) can happen: the potatoes remain hard no matter how long you cook them, and are useless. Do not ever let the temperature drop below 50°F.
- Sweet potatoes do not need to be stored in the dark. Dormancy is generally broken by moisture and warmth, not daylight. Green sprouts are not toxic, as are those of Peruvian ("white") potatoes.
- We use a rodent-proof "cage" in our basement. We stack the boxes directly on top of each other and this seems to keep enough moisture in. This way, assuming we had a good enough harvest, we can still have sweet potatoes into May and early June.

Resources (updated 12/29/21)

- ❑ ATTRA *Sweet Potato: Organic production* <https://attra.ncat.org/product/sweetpotato-organic-production/>
- ❑ North Carolina State University, *Diseases of Sweetpotato* https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/search_results?q=diseases+of+sweetpotato
- ❑ N C S U, *Pests of Sweetpotato* <https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/insect-and-related-pests-of-vegetables/pests-of-sweetpotato>
- ❑ Mississippi State University *Commercial Sweet Potato Production in MS* <http://ageconsearch.umn.edu/bitstream/15785/1/rr99-005.pdf>
- ❑ Clemson University *Sweet Potatoes for fresh Market – Irrigated: Estimated Costs and Returns for Sweet Potatoes* <https://www.clemson.edu/extension/agribusiness/files/enterprise-budgets/sweetpotatoes-irr.pdf>
- ❑ Islam, A. F. M. Saiful, C. Kubota, M. Takagaki, and T. Kozai. 2002. *Sweetpotato growth and yield from plug transplants of different volumes, planted intact or without roots*. *Crop Sci.* 42:822-826. <https://access.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.2135/cropsci2002.8220>
- ❑ Somasundaram, K. and V. S. Santhosh Mithra. 2008. *Madhuram: A simulation model for sweet potato growth*. *World Jour. Agr. Sci.* 4: 241-254. <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.415.4824&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- ❑ *Sustainable Practices for Vegetable Production in the South*, Dr Mary Peet: <https://www.amazon.com/Sustainable-Practices-Vegetable-Production-South/dp/0941051552>
- ❑ LSU Ag Center Sweet Potato IPM (not organic, but includes good info on insect pests) https://www.lsuagcenter.com/topics/crops/sweet_potatoes/insects/sweet-potato-insect-pest-management
- ❑ Alabama Co-operative Extension *Guide to Commercial Sweetpotato Production in Alabama* https://farmanswers.org/Library/Record/guide_to_commercial_sweetpotato_production_in
- ❑ Alabama Co-operative Extension *Harvesting and Curing Sweetpotatoes* https://www.aces.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/ANR-1111-Harvesting-Curing-Sweet-Potatos_061319La.pdf or <https://www.aces.edu/blog/topics/lawn-garden/harvesting-and-curing-sweet-potatoes/>
- ❑ University of Georgia Extension *Sweet Potato Production and Pest Management in Georgia* <https://extension.uga.edu/publications/detail.html?number=B1489&title=Sweet%20Potato%20Production%20and%20Pest%20Management%20in%20Georgia> *Sweetpotato production in California* <http://anrcatalog.ucanr.edu/pdf/7237.pdf>
- ❑ *Sweetpotato production in California* https://vric.ucdavis.edu/veg_info_crop/sweetpotato.htm
- ❑ Anthony Boutard and Caroline Boutard Hunt wrote about single node sweet potato propagation in *Growing for Market* in March 2015.

Suppliers of slips

- ❑ Sand Hill Preservation Center, Iowa. Heirlooms, 225 Varieties. Some limits on how many you can buy. <https://www.sandhillpreservation.com/sweet-potato>
- ❑ Steele Plant Co, Slips in small and large quantities, good prices, great service. 10 varieties <https://www.sweetpotatoplant.com/>
- ❑ Southern Exposure Seed Exchange 11 varieties, all organic. <https://www.southernexposure.com/categories/sweet-potatoes/>