

Growing Sweet Potatoes

Q: I've never grown Sweet Potatoes so I'm looking for advice on what, where and when to purchase to get started. I've read about buying "cuttings" or making my own with a single potato. Any advice would be appreciated.

A: We learned a lot in researching answers for you. Our first learning was that sweet potato is actually properly spelled as one word, sweetpotato. To quote the informative North Carolina State University website (<https://projects.ncsu.edu/cals/plantpath/extension/commodities/sweetpotato-one-word.html>),

In many cases confusion arises with a two-word spelling because the first word can be interpreted as an adjective modifying a noun. For example "goldapple" is a tomato, but if spelled as "gold apple" most people would think it is an ordinary apple with a gold skin color. As you may know, the United States Department of Agriculture for years has used the one-word spelling for sweetpotato to avoid such problems.

The second learning is that sweetpotatoes and yams are not the same plant. Yams are from Africa and Asia while sweetpotatoes originated here in the Americas.

We can confirm that these plants are grown from cuttings or "slips". You should be able to purchase slips from local gardening centers, a local co-op or by mail order. We searched "Sweetpotato slips for sale" in our internet search engine and found quite a few options for purchase. These online stores also offered disease resistant varieties.

Plant sweetpotatoes when soil temperatures are well above 60F – usually later in spring. They grow best in 75F-85F soil temperatures.

Visit the UT Horticultural website (<https://uthort.tennessee.edu/>) to find region-specific sweetpotatoes information. Publication D 71, "Sweetpotatoes for the Tennessee Vegetable Garden" has a lot of helpful information based on UT extension research with these plants. There's an old saying "the devil is in the details" and this document has the details to help you.

We also want to mention a Master Gardener favorite publication from the UT Horticultural website that Tennessee gardeners will find useful. "Tennessee Home Fruit and Vegetable Garden 2022 Calendar," publication W 436. It includes a month-by-month task list, as well as pests, and pathogens to watch out for in that month, a list of helpful resources and publications, and much more.

Thank you for submitting your question. The research was fun and we learned quite a bit in the search for answers.

The Master Gardeners of Northeast Tennessee