



Urban Harvest

Growing Sweet Potatoes can turn out Sweet

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Sweet potatoes are an excellent summer crop. It is of course a delicious, nutritious and filling vegetable. But for the summer food gardener, they have several additional benefits.

First, they need almost no irrigation most summers. Second, their quickly spreading vines crowd out almost all weeds, so their care during the hot summer months is almost zero. Third, they love temperatures above 80 degrees Fahrenheit and high humidity. Fourth, their 90- to 120-day requirement for a good harvest fits perfectly as a replacement for finishing spring crops.



Fifth, once three months have passed, they can be harvested whenever the gardener chooses until late November. Sixth, sweet potatoes can be stored in a 55-degree closet all winter, and a raised bed just 15 feet long probably can feed a small family weekly for many months.

Do not plant a sweet potato in the garden to get more sweets. Although this would grow sweet potatoes, it brings pests. The sweet potato weevil, wire grub, and wireworm all live in stored sweet potatoes, so don't infect your garden with them. And try not to grow sweets in the same bed again for several years.

Rather, either buy rooted vines (called sets) or grow them from old tubers away from the garden. If you can't find them at a local nursery, you can order online from many companies such as www.willhite.com. Note however, that the further north the supplier, the earlier in summer they stop shipping, because their season is shorter than ours. Of the many

varieties I have tried, the 90-day Beauregard has proven to be the most bug-resistant and productive.

If you choose to grow your own sets, you need to have organic sweet potatoes since they will not have been treated with anti-sprouting chemicals. Put their pointy end up and the opposite end in a container of water. Place them indoors or outside where there will be light in the daytime, and temperatures of 70 degrees all day and night; the warmer the better.

In a few weeks, when sprouts are 4 inches long, pull them off the potato and put their bottoms in a separate container of water. In a few days, they will have roots. You can then plant them directly in the garden by watering daily for a week, or transfer them into pots for a few days to develop their roots, and then transplant.

In order to plant them, you need to modify your raised bed. Sweet potatoes need a very deep, highly drained bed. If your 4-5 foot wide bed is less than 18 inches deep, you need to dig a shovel width and depth of soil from each side of the bed and pile it in the interior of the bed. In this way, you create a center bed 12 inches or higher, 2 feet rather than 4 feet wide, and as long as your bed. Then plant the sets 10 inches apart in two rows down the bed. Once the vines start running, mulch them well and come back in the fall to dig.

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