

# A Sweet Potato to Treasure

UConn Home and Garden Education Center

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Sweet potatoes (*Ipomea batatas*) are a common component in many Americans' diets with the average person consuming about 4 pounds of them each year. It is a member of the morning glory family and native to Central and South America. In warmer regions, it is an herbaceous perennial vine with either heart-shaped or palmately-lobed leaves and large, tasty tuberous roots. Personally, I just like the roots with a little salt and butter but other family members prefer the version with marshmallows.

Long, hot summers with warm nights favors sweet potato production. Plants like well-drained soil with a pH from 5 to 7, lots of sun and moderate amounts of fertility and moisture. 'Beauregard' is a popular northern garden variety requiring about 90 days to maturity. It was developed at the Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station in 1981.

Many gardeners are familiar with ornamental sweet potato vines. They are copiously used as spillers in containers and window boxes as well as making attractive, vigorous annual groundcovers. These ornamental beauties reach up only about 6 inches high but may send out 4 to 6 feet long shoots if happy. Trim if they grow out of proportion with your arrangement.

Like edible sweet potatoes, the leaves may be heart-shaped or palmate but they were specifically bred not for their tuberous roots but for their unique, exotically colored leaves. 'Blackie' is renowned for its dark, 5-lobed purple foliage, 'Marguerite' for golden chartreuse heart-shaped leaves and 'Sweet Caroline' for hand-shaped foliage of a most unique shade of coppery bronze. While one could eat the roots, they are not particularly tasty.

This year saw an award winning introduction from Concept Plants – Treasure Island sweet potatoes. Once again the plant scientists at the Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station have come up with a winner. These exquisite plants not only sport the most delightful ornamental foliage but they produce edible and tasty tuberous roots. These traits merited Treasure Island sweet potatoes to receive the Green Thumb award in edible plants for 2020. Green Thumb awards recognize outstanding garden products available to the public. Just a quick internet search lead to Spring Hill Nurseries as a distributor of these new plants.

Called Treasure Island sweet potatoes because each plant hides a 'treasure' underneath the soil, the good sized tuberous roots can be dug up as the gardening season comes to a close and enjoyed at your Thanksgiving table. The sweet

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potato plants in the Treasure Island series are named after various Polynesian islands. Each features different colored leaves and roots. Not only are the roots delectable but the young leaves can be plucked and added to salads and stir fries. Not too many mind you or plants will not have enough energy to both produce attractive foliage throughout the growing season as well as good sized roots for fall feasts.

To date, 5 varieties of Treasure Island sweet potatoes are available for you to grow. 'Tahiti' features purple fleshed roots with purple skin and edible 5-lobed green leaves. Combine it in a container with gold marigolds or mini-peppers and lemon grass.

'Tatakoto' sports classic orange fleshed sweet potatoes but with purple skins. Leaves are tri-lobed and an attractive dark greenish purple, delicious in salads. Try pairing with 'Dark Opal' basil and pink calibrachoa or verbena.

'Makatea' has beautiful, chartreuse heart-shaped leaves. It is a vigorous twining plant with white-fleshed roots, which reportedly make a delicious addition to Asian and Caribbean dishes. The pointed leaves are also a nice salad addition.

'Kaukura' shows off its delightful, purple heart-shaped leaves that are so attractive, one might not want to eat them. Roots boast both an orange skin and flesh. Consider planting in the vegetable garden or in containers as this vigorous plant will do well in either situation.

'Manihi' is noted for its deep purple 5-lobed foliage along with orange tuberous roots covered in orange skin. Use the leaves in culinary dishes and savor the roots when plants are cut down by the frost. All sweet potatoes are tender and even a moderate frost event will put an end to their upper half. The roots, however, can still be harvested and enjoyed.

Sweet potatoes have been labeled superfoods. Rich in fiber and complex carbohydrates, they also contain beta-carotene plus vitamins B, C and manganese. This spring has seen much focus on growing your own food. Give Treasure Island sweet potatoes a try either in the garden or in a large container. Enjoy the colorful and attractive foliage during the growing season and their tasty 'treasures' at fall harvest gatherings.

If you have questions about growing sweet potatoes or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at [www.ladybug.uconn.edu](http://www.ladybug.uconn.edu) or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.

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