

UT Gardens Plant of the Month

Grow Sweet Potatoes for Fun, Beauty, and Great Nutrition

Submitted by Holly Jones, Horticulturist, University of Tennessee Gardens, Knoxville



Enjoy sweet potato plants in the garden for the variety of textures and colors offered by their leaves, then harvest their edible roots in early fall. 'Manihi' foliage and flower pictured with 'Beauregard' leaf and tuber. Photo courtesy of Holly Jones.

Delicious, nutritious, and easy to grow, sweet potatoes (*Ipomoea batatas*) are a good choice for Tennessee gardeners with a sunny space and the desire to “grow your own.” The long, humid days of summer in the Southeast are perfect for this vigorously vining root crop that features edible leaves and charming funnel-shaped flowers that come in shades of pink and purple.

Sweet potatoes grow so well in Tennessee that Weakley County in West Tennessee is central to the crop’s production across the United States. In the 1950s and 60s, five companies in the county produced more than 10 million sweet potato slips. Slips are the rooted cuttings from which sweet potatoes are generally grown. Today while only the Steele Plant Company remains, this family-owned and operated company shipped more than 3 million slips this year to locations throughout the continental U.S. Another fun fact to know is

the town of Gleason, Tennessee, is known as Tater Town and annually hosts a festival called the Tater Town Special on Labor Day weekend.

So how do you produce taters of your own? Whether you purchase them from a local grower, get them from your neighbor or order them online, the ideal planting time is between May and June, which allows for a 3-5 month growing period before cool weather sets in. Slips planted later in the season may still produce, but the yield will be smaller. Plants that are put in the ground too early may suffer from cool soil temperatures. While no special soil preparation is required in the average garden, the tubers will be larger and more perfectly shaped if the soil is deep and well drained with a moderate level of fertility. Side dress with a general all-purpose fertilizer about a month after planting if desired.

Harvest at the end of the growing season before the first deep frost by cutting back the vines and lifting the roots out of the ground with a small shovel, potato fork, or your hands. At the UT Gardens, Knoxville, we do our best to find children to help with this part. Harvesting the sweet potato patch is like digging for gold! Kids love it. Once all the tuberous roots have been found it’s important to start the curing process. This is a process that increases the sugar content and gives sweet potatoes a longer storage life. After brushing off most of the soil, store them in a dark area at 80-85 degrees Fahrenheit and 90% humidity for about a week. After this, they should be stored in a low humidity area between 50-60 degrees Fahrenheit.

For detailed information on growing sweet potatoes in Tennessee, please see UT Extension Publication D71 “Sweet Potatoes for the Tennessee Vegetable Garden.” The publication is available [online](#).

There are thousands of different kinds of sweet potatoes from which to choose. Common varieties like ‘Beauregard’ and ‘Jewel’ will grow rapidly, sending vines out as long as 16 feet in one season. If space is an issue, try growing them up a trellis, regularly trim back the vines to keep the plants in check, or choose a bush variety such as ‘Vardaman’. Treasure Island is a new series commercially available from Burpee that includes three varieties with deep purple or chartreuse leaves. We are experimenting with the purple-leaved ‘Manihi’ at the UT Gardens, Knoxville, this summer with great success so far. You can see them growing outside the Kitchen Garden.



Gardening Tips

“Gardening requires lots of water - most of it in the form of perspiration.”

Lou Erickson

October Tips

- Remember that seasonal mums are more valuable as compost than as "keep around plants" after they've faded and split. Don't be tempted to plant them! Even if they establish themselves, they rarely live up to your expectations the following year. Chrysanthemums Clara Curtis', 'Ryan's Yellow', and 'Sheffield Pink' are good reliable perennial cultivars that perform well in the landscape. 'Fireworks Igloo' from Blooms of Bressingham is a newer introduction of perennial mum that performed well in University of Tennessee trials in 2013 and this year. We have several more of the 'Igloo' series this year and so far, so good. Warm season ornamental grasses such as Miscanthus and Pennisetum (fountain grass), resent being dug, divided, and replanted in the fall. It is best to wait until early spring. As a general rule, avoid planting even container-grown warm-season grasses in the fall. There isn't sufficient time for the roots to establish, and the plants may be lost over the winter.
- Collect seeds of any annuals you would like to grow again next year. Allow drying completely before storing. A paper bag works great as a container that allows the seed to dry.
- You still have time to order bulbs, but be swift about it. Get them in the ground by early December.
- Before the first frost, dig up caladiums and shake off the soil. Allow them to dry completely and store them in a warm dry place for the winter.
- October is a good time to plant trees and shrubs since dormant plants will be under less stress. Newly installed deciduous plants require almost no watering during the winter months but don't forget a thorough initial watering is paramount. Monitor evergreens such as junipers, hollies, and arborvitae for watering needs if rain is sparse. Even in winter, a plant with leaves on it will transpire. Winter wind desiccation can hurt an evergreen tree that lacks sufficient moisture.
- Wash your pumpkins, gourds, and winter squash in a mild bleach solution before displaying or storing to help prevent rot.
- October is a good time to control broad-leaf weeds such as white clover and wild garlic in your lawn. Check with your local county UT Extension office for specific recommendations.
- Don't forget to bring in your tropical and house plants before frost. Many plants don't like it when the temperatures drop into the 40s.
- After frost, you can cut back your deciduous herbaceous perennials. This helps lessen the chance of disease or insects overwintering in your beds.
- Perennials that are borderline hardy and may benefit from retaining their stems through the winter include hardy lantanas and salvias. Any tender plants such as cannas and elephant ears appreciate a layer of mulch for extra winter protection.
- Other perennials can be mulched with a thin layer of organic material, but keep the mulch away from the crown or it could hold too much moisture and rot the plant.
- Pick off any bagworms from your plants to help eliminate the eggs that will hatch next year. Dispose of them in the garbage and not the compost or they may survive and hatch.
- To make leaf removal less of a chore, rake them before they accumulate deeply. If you have a fescue lawn or moss garden it is even more important to keep the leaves removed. Compost or use them as mulch in your beds. You can also till them into your soil and by spring they will be composted. Leaves on the lawn can be chopped with the lawnmower and left in place if the debris is not too deep.

Seed Saving Resources

<https://extension.umn.edu/planting-and-growing-guides/saving-vegetable-seeds>

<https://extension.psu.edu/seed-saving-basics>

https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/experience_the_many_benefits_of_seed_saving

Two Great Video Series on Forestry

- “Back Porch Forestry” with Dr. Mercker https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_0Z5Y2I2wfDh-UcOeOVn3g 12 half-hour videos on forestry
- “[TN Urban Forestry Council Webinar Series](#)” 19-hour-long videos are available for MGs these 12 might be the most interesting
 1. [Introduction to Tree Identification](#)
 2. [Plant Disease in Urban Forests Webinar](#)
 3. [Proactive Pest Management in Winter and Spring](#)
 4. [Emerald Ash Borer: What to Expect, How to Respond](#)
 5. [Tennessee's Landmark & Historic Tree Registry](#)
 6. [If You Plant It They Will Come: Using Tree Selection for Pollinators and Songbirds](#)
 7. [TUFC Webinar: Tree Preservation During Construction: Getting to the Root of the Problem](#)
 8. [Tree City USA & Tree Campus USA Introduction](#)
 9. [Winter Tree Care: Tips for Homeowners](#)
 10. [Urban Tree Pests to Expect in 2022](#)
 11. [Tennessee Champion Tree Program](#)
 12. [How Trees Die: Understanding Basic Tree Physiology](#)

What is an heirloom?

The term heirloom is defined in many ways. One definition is a vegetable cultivar that has been grown for a certain length of time. For others, an heirloom is passed down by a family or group preserving them for future use. Since the seed is passed down and kept from year to year heirlooms are always open-pollinated. Hybrid seeds cannot be kept in this fashion and do not reproduce true from seed.

Why Grow Heirlooms?

One reason for many gardeners saving an heirloom cultivar is nostalgia. Others consider heirlooms to have a superior flavor. The most important reason to preserve heirlooms is to keep their genetic traits for future use. Check out the source publication for more information.

Source

<http://www.clemson.edu/extension/hgic/plants/vegetables/gardening/hgic1255.html>

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2022 Dates

- September 11-17, 2022 Sequatchie County Fair
- September 24, 2022, SVMG Family Picnic. 4:00 PM Central Coke Ovens Park
 - Bring a covered dish, chairs, and the family and enjoy an afternoon of fun
- November 5, 2022, Quarterly Meeting – Pikeville

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