Growing Sweetpotatoes in Western Washington

Sweetpotato Greens

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Sweetpotato Greens

Sweetpotato (*Ipomoea batatas*) is in the Convolvulaceae (Morning Glory) family and stems and leaves are edible, unlike potato (*Solanum tuberosum*) leaves which are in the Solanaceae (Nightshade) family. Tender sweetpotato vine tips are consumed as a vegetable in many regions of the world, including the Pacific Islands, Asia and parts of Africa. Sweetpotato greens are a highly nutritious leafy green that can be harvested throughout the hot summer months when many other leafy greens decline in quality (Figure 1). Some growers in western Washington grow sweetpotato only for the greens and do not harvest the roots at all. Sweetpotato greens can be marketed as a replacement for spinach throughout the late summer and early fall. The greens are typically sold in bunches of about 15-20 stems for $3 to $5 per bunch.

Figure 1. Sweetpotato plants in the field after vine tip harvest (left) and harvested vine tips (right).

Nutritional Value

Sweetpotato greens are high in many nutrients, including carotene, calcium, and iron (Ishiguro et al. 2004). They have moderately high levels of polyphenols, which act as an antioxidant (Ishiguro et al. 2004; Islam 2014).

How and When to Harvest Sweetpotato Greens

Cut 4 to 6 inches of the vine tip, from sweetpotato vines that are at least 12 inches long. In western Washington, vine tips can be harvested starting about 8 weeks after transplanting. Production peaks around 10 to 12 weeks after transplanting and remains steady until root harvest. Sweetpotato vines can be recut as soon as new tips regrow, about every 2 weeks. Older leaves and stems are typically tough and not preferred for human consumption but can be fed to livestock.

Impact of Harvesting Greens on Root Yield

Harvesting sweetpotato greens has a major impact on root yield. In a trial in Mount Vernon, WA in 2023 and 2024, sweetpotato plants that had all vine tips removed at 2 week intervals from 8-12 weeks after transplanting,

Learn more!

More information about the nutritional benefits of sweetpotato greens can be found in FSA6135: Nutritional and Medicinal Qualities of Sweetpotato Tops and Leaves (pdf).

https://www.uaex.uada.edu/publications/PDF/FSA-6135.pdf

8-14 weeks after transplanting, or 12-14 weeks after transplanting had 58%, 61%, and 47% lower storage root yields than plants where no greens were harvested (unpublished data). Root size also decreases with greens harvest, though late greens harvest (12-16 weeks after transplanting) has less of an impact on root size (unpublished data).

To reduce the impact on root yield, greens should be harvested minimally or only 12 or more weeks after transplanting. Harvesting vine tips just before storage root harvest will have no impact on storage root yield. When the roots are ready for harvest, cut the vine tips for greens and then cut and remove the entire top of the plant. Removing vines from the field facilitates root harvest. Vines can be used as livestock feed (Puerto 2024).

Although harvesting greens has a major impact on root yield, the economic return can be very good if there is a market for sweetpotato greens. For example, harvesting greens at a 2-week interval from 8 to 16 weeks after transplanting had a 42% higher economic return compared to harvesting and selling only the roots when market prices were $3/lb for roots and $3/bunch (20 stems) for greens and a 111% higher economic return when market prices were $3/lb for roots and $5/bunch for greens (unpublished data).

Cooking and Consuming Sweetpotato Greens

Sweetpotato greens have a similar eating quality to spinach and have a slightly floral and clove-like flavor. They can be consumed like other leafy greens: fresh, stir-fried, or steamed. The leaves can be frozen or dried for later use. The fresh leaves and stems can also be boiled for 2-3 minutes to make a sweetpotato "green tea" (Ishiguro et al. 2004).

Additional Resources

Check out our sweetpotato webpage (vegetables.wsu.edu/sweetpotato/) for more resources on using sweetpotato greens—including a marketing brochure and sample recipes!

Learn more!

Sweetpotato vines can be fed to livestock! For more information on feeding sweetpotato vines to livestock, see our observational study of livestock acceptance of feeding sweetpotato vines (pdf).

https://wpcdn.web.wsu.edu/extension/uploads/sites/25/2024/10/Observational-study-of-livestock-acceptance-of-feeding-sweetpotato-vines-After-Radhikas-observations.pdf

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