



Tips for Growing Sweet Potatoes

for the Whatcom County Home Gardener

Tips from Workshop held on 8/6/25

WSU Whatcom County Master Gardener Experimental Demonstration Garden (XDG),
Hovander Homestead Park, Ferndale

<https://vegetables.wsu.edu/sweetpotato>

WSU Whatcom County Master Gardener volunteers have been working with researchers at WSU Mt. Vernon (NWREC) to learn about and share with others this unique vegetable. The goal is to extend the scientific research of this crop into the home gardening setting. These are some highlights of what Master Gardeners have learned while growing the crop this season in the demonstration gardens at Hovander Demonstration Gardens.

Sweet Potatoes (*Ipomoea batata*) are a member of the morning glory or Convolvulaceae family and are highly nutritious and packed with vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants. Sweet Potatoes are not related to yams, which are native to Africa and Asia.

Choosing a Variety – the Experimental Demonstration Garden at Hovander Park chose three varieties that have been successfully trialed for commercial use at the WSU Northwest Regional Extension Campus (NWREC) in Mt Vernon.

Cascade, Beauregard and Covington. These varieties have a shorter growing season.

Cascade Sweet potatoes are a new USDA sweet potato and mature in 90-110 days. They are wireworm larvae resistant, which is the main pest in Pacific Northwest (PNW). Yields of this sweet potato grown in the PNW are similar to national averages. Beauregard's and Covington's are susceptible to wireworm damage. We also are growing sweet potatoes from slips of an unknown variety from a local organic grocery store.

Soil – must be well draining and rich in aged organic matter. Sandy loamy soil with a pH 5.8-6.2 (*slightly acidic*). Soil tests are recommended to guide any soil amendments.

Location – sunny and hot (*at least 8-10 hours direct sunlight*); Can tolerate up to 100-110°F degree air temperatures. USDA plant hardiness zones 8-11. They are not cold tolerant.

When to Plant – when weather is frost free, night temps >60°F and soil temps >65°F. For Whatcom County this is typically the end of May or first week of June at the latest. Use black plastic sheet mulch or other material to raise soil temperatures before planting. Protect plantings from cold or temps <60°F. It is not recommended to use grow tunnels.

Amend the Soil – using well aged organic manure. It is not recommended to fertilize during growing season as the yield will be reduced in total number and size of tubers if fed Nitrogen. Sweet potatoes generally have low fertilizer needs.

Grow Sweet Potato slips – you can propagate slips yourself and/or buy slips. Each potato will produce over a dozen slips. You can place a sweet potato in well-drained potting soil, water consistently, moist but not over saturated. Air temperature above 80°F with high humidity in a tray covered with transparent plastic on your well-lit kitchen counter or in a greenhouse.

Slip Production – slips with 5 leaves and 5 nodes are ready for transplanting directly into the garden within 4-6 weeks. Harden off. Pre-rooting is not necessary.

Transplant the slips – bury 3-5 nodes (w/o leaves) into the soil directly. Water immediately. Transplant shock is common, slips are very resilient and should take off after 2 weeks. Place your slips 12-18 inches apart into a raised bed, 8 inch hilled row, 10-20 gallon cloth pots w trellis, straw bales, or cardboard boxes.

Irrigation – Water consistently to a depth of 1-2 inches for the first 2 weeks until plants are well established, then it is recommended to water down to 14 inches depth >1x/week. Use drip irrigation or soaker hoses on timers to conserve water.

Integrated Pest Management – Main pest in Western WA is wire worm larvae which can destroy a harvest. Do not plant sweet potatoes in a garden that has known wire worms and/or has recently been changed from sod or grass cover crops. Buy wireworm resistant varieties. Use crop rotation. Also, leaf eating and sucking pests are not a huge problem for sweet potatoes in this area. They may cause some leaf damage but will not affect harvest generally. Monitor for diseased and struggling plants.

Harvest – begin to check for sweet potatoes maturity at 90 days, early September. Gently dig by hand or w a shovel starting 2 feet away from plant, finding potatoes starting at 6 inch depth. Take care not to cut or bruise the potatoes as they are susceptible to rot.

Yield: approx. 5-10 sweet potatoes per plant or one pound per plant.

Cure – store 2 weeks in hot (80-85dg) humid (60-80%) location away from direct sunlight.

Store – store in cool dry location for 4-6 months. Can wrap them in newspapers to further protect during moving/storing. If conditions are good, refrigeration is not necessary.

Other – sweet potato vines are edible and can be prepared like stir fry. The vines, either fresh or silage, are a feed source for chickens, pigs, goats, sheep, and cattle.

WSU Master Gardener Mission:

Engaging university-trained volunteers to empower and sustain diverse communities with relevant, unbiased, research-based horticulture and environmental stewardship education.

Our statewide Priorities the “9 Pillars” for home gardening. Water conservation, soil health, pollinators, local food, plant biodiversity, nearby nature, wildfire preparedness, climate change and clean water.

The **Experimental Demonstration Garden at Hovander Park** provides public education on selected research trials and demonstrates various garden practices such as no-till, chop and drop, Integrated Pest Management, soil testing and amendments, drip irrigation, polyethylene plastic mulches. For more information, go to: <https://whatcommgf.org/gardens/hovander-garden> “Hovander Experimental Demonstration Garden”

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They provided us with our sweet potato tubers, tours, guidance and conversations.

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Special thanks to my co-gardener at XDG, WSU Whatcom Master Gardener **David Keller**.

His unparalleled ingenuity and dedication to this garden is our secret treasure.

Presenter: **Juliana Bohn**, WSU Whatcom Master Gardener, Lead of the Experimental Garden, Hovander

This is summary of local information and not a WSU Factsheet.