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G73-73 Sweet Potatoes (Revised June 1992)

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Neild, R.E. and Hodges, Laurie, "G73-73 Sweet Potatoes (Revised June 1992)" (1973). *Historical Materials from University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension*. 999.

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Sweet Potatoes

Varieties, requirements and culture, harvesting and storage of sweet potatoes.

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Laurie Hodges--Extension horticultureiculturists

The sweet potato, a member of the morning glory plant family, is native to tropical America. It is an important food plant in warmer regions of the world and is adapted to southeastern Nebraska. Sweet potatoes may be boiled, baked, fried, or candied. They have high food value. Varieties with deeply yellow colored roots are a good source of vitamin A.

Varieties

Sweet potato varieties are grouped into two general types--those with deep yellow orange color that are soft, moist and sweet when cooked and those with firm, dry, light-colored, mealy flesh. Yellow Jersey is a prominent variety of this latter group. Its popularity is decreasing, however, because of its shorticulture storage life and nonuniform flesh color. Soft flesh varieties are more popular. Important among these are Centennial, NemaGold, and Goldrush.

Requirements and Culture

Being of tropical origin, sweet potatoes require a long, warm growing season. Sweet potatoes require a growing season of at least five months, so they are best adapted in Nebraska to an area south of a line extending northeast through McCook, Grand Island, and West Point. They do not grow well below 70 degrees Fahrenheit, so planting should be delayed until the last week in May in the area just described. Planting should not be delayed much beyond June 10, however, since root size will be small and the yield reduced.

Sweet potatoes are not grown from seed. Plants may be purchased from a greenhouse or garden center or propagated from the tubers themselves in a hot bed, heated with an electric cable. The cable should be covered with one inch of sand. Tubers are then covered with four inches of sand, kept at 80-85 degrees Fahrenheit for three to four weeks until sprouts appear. The thermostat is then lowered to 70 degrees Fahrenheit.

Allow six weeks between the time the tubers are first bedded and transplants are set in the field. One bushel of tubers will produce about 1,000 plants from the first pulling. Additional sprouts will continue

to develop from the tubers in the hot bed.

Sweet potatoes should be planted in a ridge to provide drainage and allow for root expansion. Ridges should be about 3 1/2 feet apart with plants set 1 foot apart. Transplants should be kept moist prior to being set in the field and should be watered if the soil is dry. Weed control will be necessary until the vines meet between the rows.

Harvesting and Storage

Sweet potatoes may be harvested as soon as the roots reach eating size and should be dug before the vines are frosted. If vines do become frosted, the tubers should be dug immediately, as decay in dead vines passes down to the tubers. If immediate digging is not possible, vines should be cut away and loose soil thrown over the rows to protect them from the cold. Sweet potatoes should not be allowed to become chilled in cold soil or after they are dug. Temperature below 55 degrees may be damaging.

Take care to avoid damaging tubers during digging and handling. Cure roots at high temperature and high humidity until the skin sets and becomes set. If stored slightly above 55 degrees Fahrenheit at high humidity, sweet potatoes can be kept for six months.

File G73 under: Horticulture

C-2, Vegetables

Revised June 1992; 7,000 printed.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Elbert C. Dickey, Director of Cooperative Extension, University of Nebraska, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

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