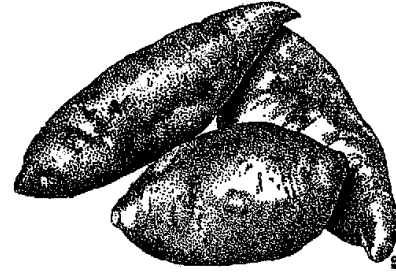


What is a Sweetpotato?



The sweetpotato (*Ipomoea batatas*, morning-glory family) is an enlarged storage root that comes in various shapes, sizes, and colors. Varieties, particularly those used for market use, are classified as “**dry-fleshed**” or “**moist-fleshed**,” according to the feel sensation experienced in the mouth when eating a cooked or baked sweetpotato. The “moist-fleshed” potato is sometimes referred to as a “yam” and the “dry-fleshed” as a “sweetpotato.” They are, however, *both sweetpotatoes*.

California sweetpotato growers produce both types. The variety **Golden Sweet** (sometimes also called Hanna Gold) is the main “dry-fleshed” type grown. It has cream colored outer layer skin with yellow interior flesh.

The major “moist-fleshed” or “yam” type varieties include the **Covington**, **Diane**, and **Beauregard**. The Diane has dark-red, smooth skin with orange flesh. It is considered the premium yam type sweetpotato because of its excellent flavor. Covington and Beauregard have copper-colored skin with deep orange flesh. They are the most commonly grown varieties in all states.

A growing part of the industry now includes oriental, or more commonly, **Japanese yams**. These have purple skin and white/cream colored flesh and are typically dryer than Beauregard, with a subtle, nutty flavor. There are also Japanese yams that have white skin with purple flesh, however, there are very few acres of this type grown in California. Most of the production of this type comes from Hawaii.

Where did the term “yam” come from? A *true yam* is an **underground tuber**. It may vary in the size range of a white potato to enormous yams weighing 30 – 40 pounds and measuring as much as 3 feet in length. It is native to Africa. The word “yam” comes from the African word, “nyami.” In the early 20th century, the state of Louisiana picked up the term “yam” and used it in the advertising of their sweetpotatoes, in order to distinguish theirs from the sweetpotatoes grown in the northeastern states. Now, the term “yam” is market terminology to denote a moist-fleshed sweet potato after it is cooked or baked.

Sweetpotatoes are native to Peru and Central America and some South Pacific islands, where they are cultured as perennials. Columbus found the sweetpotato being eaten by the natives of the West Indies and brought it back to Europe about 1500. It was not until some years later that the “Irish” or “white potato” was found in the mountains of Peru.

Sweetpotatoes are one of the most important carbohydrate crops in the world in developing countries, however in the U.S. they occupy a small niche in the American diet. There are about 100,000 acres of sweetpotatoes grown in the United States, with most of these being grown in Louisiana, Mississippi, and North Carolina. California ranks third in area planted to sweetpotatoes (about 15,000 acres), and second in total production (about 10.7 million 40 lb boxes). About 90% of the California production is located in Merced County. Sweetpotatoes are harvested in the late summer through fall, and are packed and stored for sale throughout the year. The orange-flesh types are very nutrient dense, especially for vitamin A, and are considered one of the healthiest foods.