Sweet potatoes are native to warm, tropical regions and a long season root crop. They are often referred to as “yams” to distinguish them from white potatoes. Sweet potatoes, however, are not yams—as they are botanically quite different. Yams belong to another cultivar group, have rough, scaly skin and are very low in beta carotene. In contrast, sweet potatoes have smooth skin and are rich in beta carotene among other nutrients.

Because the two words are used interchangeably in the United States (and Canada), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) requires “yam” labels to always be accompanied by “Sweet Potato” in an attempt to alleviate confusion.

References: Purdue University, UC Davis Postharvest Technology website, University of Illinois Extension, USDA.

### SEASONAL AVAILABILITY*

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<th>LOCATION</th>
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<th>MAY</th>
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*Due to the widespread use of controlled storage, sweet potatoes are no longer seasonal and available year round.

References: Alabama Cooperative Extension System, Arkansas Agriculture Dept., University of California Cooperative Extension, University of Florida Extension, Louisiana State University Ag Center Research & Extension, Mississippi State University Extension, North Carolina State University Extension, U.S. Sweet Potato Council, USDA.
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TYPES, VARIETIES & CUTS

There are hundreds of varieties of sweet potatoes and not all are the familiar orange color. Some varieties are purple, others are white, and many are variations of the orange we typically see. The most popular variety planted in North Carolina, the top producer of sweet potatoes in the United States, is the Covington, others include Bayou Belle, Bellevue, Bonita, Burgandy, Murasaki, and Orleans.

References: Louisiana State University Ag Center Research & Extension, North Carolina Sweet Potato Commission, U.S. Sweet Potato Council, USDA.

PESTS & DISEASE

Common diseases:
*Rhizopus soft rot* is a common fungal disease infecting root wounds. Diseased sweet potatoes turn soft and watery, and often have 'whiskers' of fungal growth on the surface.

*Black rot* also attacks root wounds, it can survive for several years in the soil, so crop rotation is recommended. Symptoms include small, sunken dark spots on the surface.

*Fusarium rot* is common in long-term storage; lesions are circular with light and dark brown rings.

Common pests:
*Swee potato flea beetles* injure leaves with narrow channels or grooves in the upper surfaces, turning them brown. Shallow tunnels can also be found on roots, which darken and leave scars.

The *sweet potato weevil* makes small holes on the stem-end allowing larvae to tunnel inside.

*White grubs* leave large, shallow feeding scars.


CULTIVATION, STORAGE & PACKAGING

Preharvest:
Sweet potatoes are propagated from ‘slips’ or vine clippings and grow best in warm weather. Once the roots have spread, minimal weeding is required. Plants are not drought-tolerant, so irrigation is needed if extended dryness occurs. Two to three weeks before harvesting, irrigation is typically stopped so vines begin to dry.

Postharvest:
Careful handling during harvest will minimize damage to skin and reduce decay. Sweet potatoes should be stored cool and dry at temperatures of 55 to 59°F (12.5 to 15°C) with high relative humidity (greater than 90%).

Temperatures above 59°F can cause rapid sprouting and weight loss. Chilling injury (at temperatures below 55°F) can result in decay, pulp browning, and shriveled roots.

Mechanical injury may also lead to decay; curing immediately after harvest can reduce damage caused during harvest and handling.

Sweet potatoes can be cured in bulk containers with heat (at 85 to 90°F), high humidity (90 to 95%), and ventilation for 4 to 7 days, stimulating the outer skin to reform and heal bruises and wounds.

References: North Carolina Sweet Potato Commission, Oklahoma State University, University of Illinois Extension, UC Davis Postharvest Technology website, U.S. Sweet Potato Council.
Sweet Potatoes from Generation to Generation.

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GOOD ARRIVAL GUIDELINES

Generally speaking, the percentage of defects shown on a timely government inspection certificate should not exceed the percentage of allowable defects, provided: (1) transportation conditions were normal; (2) the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) or Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) inspection was timely; and (3) the entire lot was inspected.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>U.S. Grade Standards</th>
<th>Days Since Shipment</th>
<th>% of Defects Allowed</th>
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There are no good arrival guidelines for this commodity specific to Canada; U.S. guidelines apply to shipments unless otherwise agreed by contract.

References: DRC, PACA, USDA.

SWEET POTATOES: WEEKLY MOVEMENTS & PRICES, USA

Source: Chart by Gallo Torres Agricultural Price Trends (GTAPT), mgallo@markfinstrat.com, compiled from USDA data.