

Tips for Harvesting and Curing Sweet Potatoes:

The days are getting shorter and the days cooler and I've been getting some calls about harvesting sweet potatoes. I use two factors when determining when to dig sweet potatoes: First, sweet potatoes can be dug at any time roots reach a marketable size which can occur whenever you think they are big enough for your market. They will continue to grow and size until they are either dug or get hit with frost. Which brings me to my second factor in determining when to dig them – they can take a light frost, but need to be dug before soils reach 50°F. Once soils become cold, they will start to produce a white milky substance in the roots that is bitter to the taste. They will also not store as well. Also, keep in mind that sweet potatoes do not reach their full potential flavor until they have been dug and properly cured – so digging them is only half of the work! If you are an Irish potato grower, remember that sweet potatoes are nothing like your standard Irish potatoes. In fact, they have very little in common. Sweet potatoes are much more delicate and require more attention when harvesting and storing.

Keys to sweet potato harvesting:

1. Do not let the roots get exposed to cold temperatures (less than 50°F), especially soil temperatures. Sweet potato vines can be hit with a light frost, but when roots are exposed to prolonged colder temperatures, they can form an internal white ring of tissue which really decreases the quality of the root. The roots will not store as long or taste as good. That is also why we recommend storing sweet potato roots at or around 55°F.
2. Mowing or cutting the vines will help make the harvest go easier, but it will not help “set” the skins or “toughen up” the skins as it does with regular Irish potatoes. You can mow and dig sweet potatoes the same day and the skins would be no different from if you cut the vines two weeks prior to harvesting.
3. If you are using a mechanical digger such as a potato digger to harvest your roots, make sure you run the chain as slow as possible and carry as much dirt up the chain as possible to reduce the amount of bouncing that occurs. The sweet potato has a thin, delicate skin that is easily broken. Any cuts, bruises, or skin abrasions will reduce quality and storability significantly. It might even be worth taking the shakers off your digger to reduce the amount of bouncing of the roots on the rods. The longer the chain, the more dirt that can sift down through the rods exposing the roots which can then allow workers to pull the roots off the digger before they are put back on the ground. This would eliminate one more potential bruising opportunity.
4. What should you put the roots in? I get this question a lot and if possible when picking up your sweet potatoes, use some kind of slotted crate or small bin that will allow air to flow through them. Instruct your workers to gently place them in these containers. If picking up with buckets and dumping into bins, reduce the distance the roots have to fall as much as possible. This again will help reduce cuts and bruises.
5. **Do not wash your roots until you are ready to go to market with them!** Remove as much dirt as possible when digging, keep them dry and place directly into the harvest containers. These containers should then be taken an area to cure.
6. You need to cure them after harvest for several reasons. First, curing allows any cuts, abrasions or bruises to heal which allows for better storability of roots. Second, curing is when the roots develop their flavors and starches are converted into sugars that give sweet potatoes their sweetness and flavor.
7. Ideal curing conditions are a temperature of 85°F with 90% humidity for 5-7 days. At this time of year empty greenhouses can be an excellent place to cure sweet potatoes, but there are a couple of things

that need to be done. First, floors of the greenhouse should be watered several times a day in order to keep the humidity levels at 90%. Second, make sure fans are set for 85°F and the heater is turned on and set to keep the greenhouse as close to 85°F night. Also, sweet potatoes can also suffer from sunscald like other vegetables so either make the bins or containers are covered as to not expose the roots to the direct sunlight or have shade cloths in place.

Once your sweet potatoes are cured, store as close to 55 - 60°F as possible, but no lower, and maintain a high humidity. If done properly, sweet potatoes should easily store into February and even into April if conditions are right.