

Unlock Nutritional Treasures of Sweet Potatoes

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You'd be amazed what you can dig up (pun intended) about sweet potatoes with just a little research. This honored vegetable, from the first Thanksgiving to our current holiday tables today, has quite a history.

While searching current information about sweet potatoes I found claims for curing rheumatism (if you carried one in your pocket) to eating them to increase the chances of multiple births. Plus, I was completely unaware they had a reputation as an aphrodisiac during Shakespeare's day. In the early 1600's, even English herbalist John Gerard wrote about sweet potatoes, ". . . procuring bodily lust". Who knew?

I don't really have any documented research to support these claims, but I can testify to the nutritional value of the sweet potato. And, just for the record, while the sweet potato is very similar to a yam, it is not the same vegetable. A true yam is grown in the tropics and are rarely found fresh in grocery stores. Yams are more starchy and have less sugar than sweet potatoes. According to the Louisiana Sweet Potato Commission, "yam" also refers to sweet potatoes that are grown in Louisiana, which is a Puerto Rican variety of sweet potatoes that was adopted by Louisiana producers and shippers. They call them "yams" to distinguish them from the white-fleshed sweet potatoes grown in other parts of the country. The words "yam" and "sweet potato" are often used interchangeably in this country.

Whether you call them "yams" or "sweet potatoes", the true sweet potato is rich in nutrients. It is an excellent source of vitamins and minerals, including A, C, E, thiamin, riboflavin, folate, manganese, copper, potassium, magnesium, phosphorus, iron and fiber. Plus sweet potatoes are full of beta-carotene . . . more than any other vegetable, including carrots.

This time of year, lots of folks are arming themselves with supplies for the war against winter time illnesses. Along with your flu shots and orange juice, you might want to stockpile some sweet potatoes. They are full of immune-boosting carotenoids, naturally designed to protect you in the battle against illness and disease.

When buying sweet potatoes, select those that are smooth, firm and well-shaped. Medium-sized potatoes are best for baking, while larger ones are for slicing and mashing. Avoid purchasing potatoes showing growth cracks or any sign of decay. Sweet potatoes bruise easily so should be handled gently. Bruises very quickly turn into decay spots.

Sweet potatoes need a dry storage place that is neither too hot or too cold, 55 degrees to 60 degrees F is ideal. Refrigeration is not recommended.

Early season sweet potatoes, until about Thanksgiving, are "green" or uncured. They have a relatively short storage life. Late season or cured sweet potatoes are treated in specially designed houses that hold the potatoes at controlled temperatures and humidity levels until marketed. This increases storage life but does not affect food value. Cured sweet potatoes may be purchased in larger amounts.

Sweet potatoes are among the easily prepared vegetables. They should be washed and scrubbed before cooking, but there is no need to peel them. Sweet potatoes can be baked, boiled or fried. They can be used to make biscuits, bread, muffins, pies, custards, cakes, cookies and casseroles.

Sweet potatoes can be pre-baked and frozen to enjoy all year. Wash, trim and heat potatoes in the oven at 350 degrees F until slightly soft. Cool. Place in polyethylene bags and freeze. To use, remove from bags and

complete the baking in an oven at 350 degrees F. Or, microwave until thawed, remove skins, place sweet potato into a microwave safe container, and heat through.

You can count on the nutritional value of sweet potatoes for good health, and who knows, they might also help your love life and your rheumatism at the same time!