

Potatoes Bring Color to the Home Landscape



Photos by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: The colorful foliage of ornamental sweet potato vines adds easy color to the sunny, summer landscape.

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As the weather heats up, many of us gardeners start pulling out such plants as snapdragons and pansies that provided color during the winter and early spring. Some of the plants still look good, but we have to harden our hearts and do the deed. New bedding plants must be installed before the heat sets in.

Ornamental potatoes are must-haves in the summer garden. They can be used for ground covers in combination with small shrubs, or in perennial or annual beds. Cascading over the sides of hanging baskets or containers, they are unequaled. They can also be trained to grow up trellises or other plant supports.

Most folks need only one of each cultivar of sweet potato. They need to be planted at least three feet apart, and they root easily from cuttings. So, buy one, and start some cuttings if you want them in more than one place. Cuttings root in a matter of a few days. Plants prefer full sun or partial shade and moist, well-drained soil.

Ornamental sweet potatoes enjoy hot weather. In fact, they don't really start growing until the soil warms up. When it does, however, stand back. They grow rapidly to cover an area as much as 30 square feet per plant.

These beauties are real potatoes, and like the familiar sweet potato that we enjoy with Thanksgiving and Christmas turkey, they are edible. One sweet potato casserole made from them, however, is all it will take to convince you that these bitter potatoes were not intended to be eaten.

Three main cultivars were originally sold. 'Blackie' has dark purple/black, deeply cut foliage. 'Margarita' is easy to spot because of its chartreuse colored, heart-shaped leaves. 'Tricolor' (Pink Frost) has multicolored leaves with green, pink, and white foliage. A newer cultivar is 'Black Beauty', which has rounded black leaves. Other cultivars with different leaf shapes and colors have been introduced.

Unfortunately, ornamental sweet potatoes are host plants of the sweet potato weevil that causes so much trouble for sweet potato farmers. In many areas, ornamental potatoes are banned from commerce because they

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can cause the spread of the sweet potato weevil. If you decide to grow sweet potatoes in the vegetable garden, it might be best to leave the ornamental potatoes at the nursery.

The colored foliage of these plants makes them stars in the ornamental garden. Dark ornamental grasses are highlighted in the landscape when 'Margarita' is grown at their feet. As a matter of fact, when 'Blackie' and 'Margarita' are planted together, they make a dramatic statement.

'Blackie' provides a background against which yellow, peach, or orange flowers positively glow. Like the basic black dress that is a backbone of almost every lady's wardrobe, dark purple goes with everything in the garden. It is stunning with red salvias, lantana, pentas, dusty miller and—oh, I cannot think of a color that does not go with this dark, unassuming purple. It is a great mediator. The only mistake might be its overuse without other plants to lighten the mood.

Pick up a few ornamental potatoes and give them a try this summer. The only thing that may mar your enjoyment is their exuberance and willingness to grow unabatedly in the worst of summer's heat. Don't get them if you don't like an enthusiasm in your bedding plants. They need elbow room. Move on over!

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