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Sweet Potatoes Aren't Just for Thanksgiving!



Sweet potatoes are the quintessential Thanksgiving food. But they are so delicious and grown locally, so we can eat them every day throughout the Fall! Sweet potatoes are root vegetables with a wonderfully sweet flavor. Although predominantly orange fleshed, they can also be white or purple. But calling them a potato is really a misnomer since they are actually not at all botanically related to a potato.

Sweet potatoes have their origins in South and Central America. In fact, relics of sweet potatoes were found in Peruvian caves dating back more than 10,000 years ago. It was Christopher Columbus who brought sweet potatoes to Europe and the New World. By the 1500's, sweet potatoes

Farmers Markets in Fall: Still Lots to Enjoy

Fall is one of the best times to enjoy farmers markets. There's still plenty of farm-fresh produce available but fewer crowds. Summer crops you may find still available at market include sweet corn, tomatoes, leeks, onions, potatoes, broccoli, collards, eggplant, cabbage, peppers, blueberries, and grapes. And cooler weather yields a whole bounty of new crops: pumpkins, squash, turnips, apples, pears, cauliflower, and sweet potatoes.

While some markets run year round and offer local fruits and veggies that have been in cold storage as well as local jams, jellies, preserves, and holiday crafts, for many markets fall is the last hurrah before closing for the season. Make sure to take advantage by buying lots at your local market! Some foods can even be frozen to allow for use after markets close.

Broccoli, peppers, blueberries, squash, and cauliflower all freeze well. For smaller foods like berries, wash and pat dry then freeze on a cookie sheet in single layers and transfer to a freezer-safe bag once fully frozen. Make sure to use a cookie sheet or your berries will be stuck together and impossible to portion after freezing. For larger foods such as broccoli, cauliflower, and squash, blanch in hot water for 2 - 3

were widely cultivated throughout the southern states. Now the US grows over 1 million tons of sweet potatoes every year, primarily in the south, but many farmers are growing sweet potatoes throughout the country and bringing them to farmers markets for sale.

One question farmers are often asked is "What's the difference between a sweet potato and a yam?" Actually they are not even closely related botanically. But we often think of them interchangeably. Sweet potatoes can have white, orange or even purple flesh. Processors often term the orange fleshed sweet potato as a yam to distinguish it from the white fleshed sweet potato. However, in the US, most often when you find something called a yam, it is really a sweet potato. Yams are native to Asia and Africa. They have a very dark, bark-like skin with white, purple or reddish flesh. They are starchier and drier than sweet potatoes and much larger. Yams can grow up to 5 feet long! To purchase yams you will likely have to find a shop that specializes in tropical foods.

The orange flesh of the sweet potato holds significant levels of beta carotene, vitamins A and C, as well as high levels of iron and potassium. This makes sweet potatoes a very healthy and beneficial vegetable. The beta carotenes promote eyesight and, along with other antioxidants found in sweet potatoes, build our immunities to help ward off diseases, particularly cancers. The high levels of vitamins and minerals in sweet potatoes are particularly important for bone and blood health, as well as general, over-all health.

Despite the natural sweetness of sweet potatoes, diabetics can indulge in this root vegetable. Whereas the starches of most root crops breakdown into simple sugars that cause spiked levels of blood sugar, the sugars in sweet potatoes are released slowly, helping to regulate blood sugar by reducing fluctuations in blood sugar levels during digestion. For diabetics, they are a healthy treat!

When you find sweet potatoes at your local farmers market, look for those that are firm without cracks or soft spots. Size does not matter, as sweet potatoes can be small potato shaped roots or elongated cylindrical shaped. If cooking them whole, purchase sweet potatoes that are all relatively uniform in size so that cooking time will be equal.

Store your sweet potatoes in a cool, dark and ventilated location. But never refrigerate them! Refrigeration causes an off-flavor.

When using your sweet potatoes, keep in mind that the flesh will oxidize and darken when exposed to the air. They should be used immediately after cutting or peeling them.

Sweet potatoes are a versatile root vegetable. They can be boiled, mashed, roasted, baked and fried. They can even be eaten raw in a salad, such as a slaw. They can be a side dish on your dinner table or the main entrée. They can also be your dessert!

minutes before freezing to kill the enzymes on the foods. Then place into an ice bath to cool and into a freezer bag, taking out as much of the water and air as possible.

These veggies are all safe to eat if frozen raw, but they may develop off colors or flavors depending on how long they are frozen. Potatoes and sweet potatoes do not freeze well but they keep for a long time if stored in a cool, dark place and kept away from moisture and other foods. And apples from the market in fall will be fresher so they'll keep for a few weeks on the counter or even longer in a root cellar. Do not store apples near potatoes as potatoes release a gas as they age that will cause the apples to spoil faster.

Some of my favorite foods to make in fall include apple sauce, pumpkin pie, and popcorn balls. What are yours? Fall is also a great time to visit farms with your family. Many offer amenities such as pumpkin and apple picking, face painting, hay rides, and apple fritters hot from the fryer. Visiting farms helps teach your kids where our food comes from and how hard farmers work to make food for everyone. When visiting farms with your children, ask them questions: What kind of equipment does a farmer use? How does he pick his crops? You may even be able to get a peek at the equipment used to make apples into cider. Visiting the farm is fun for everyone!

You can get many things from the market needed to prepare for fall holidays too: corn stalks, hay, and pumpkins for Jack 'o Lanterns on Halloween; pie pumpkins and apples, and sweet potatoes for casseroles, along with all the local veggies needed for trimmings on Thanksgiving. Some markets even have local turkeys too!

Along with the traditional ways of using these ingredients, try using them in new ways you haven't tried before. For example, if you usually make squash boiled and

For delicious recipes using sweet potatoes, go to <http://www.snaptomarket.com/recipes.php>

You'll also want to find markets near you, where you can purchase fresh, locally grown sweet potatoes direct from farmers. For a complete list of markets in New York State, visit www.nyfarmersmarket.com and click on markets. Or for a list of markets that are equipped to accept food stamp benefits, visit www.snaptomarket.com/locations.php. Each list is searchable by county, city, zip or market name.

Eat Smart New York provides nutrition education, recipes and assistance with the SNAP program. To learn more visit: <http://otda.ny.gov/programs/nutrition>

For SNAP Education visit: <http://www.jsyfruitveggies.org>



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mashed, try roasting it or pureeing it into a soup. If you usually make apple crisp, try making apple pancakes, apple sage stuffed pork chops, or even spiced apple rings. If you usually boil cauliflower, then try chopping it raw and adding it to a salad or antipasto, making a cauliflower mash, or adding roasted cauliflower to a soup. And if you usually make pumpkin pie, try making pumpkin bread with walnuts and honey, pumpkin cranberry muffins, or even pumpkin-squash soup. When experimenting with new ways to use veggies, you might find that you or your child likes a vegetable you thought you didn't. Baking veggies and fruits into casseroles and breads, or adding to soups is a great way to sneak a little extra nutrition into your diet.

Fall is my favorite season - it's a time of reaping harvest, a time for enjoying the beautiful foliage, for giving thanks for another great year, and definitely a time for visiting your local farmers market.



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