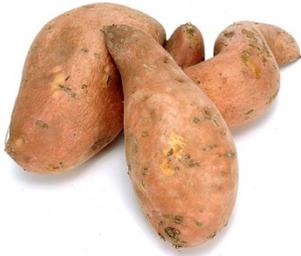


Sweet Potatoes



It is curious that we associate certain vegetables with particular seasons, usually around the time we would harvest them, although most people are far removed from actually growing them. Some vegetables are noticeably unavailable and underused except for a certain time of the year.

Once upon a time, cranberries fell into this category, but now they are always available. These cousins of blueberries are among the few fruits indigenous to

North America. Native Americans used them as the original energy bars. Apparently, when we make juice or cranberry sauce we use significantly more sweetener than they did.

Pumpkins, which technically are just big squash, are an example of vanishing vegetable. After Halloween has passed, they almost disappear from supermarkets. It is true that growers harvest them in mid to late fall, but even canned pumpkin is rare during the rest of the year. Pumpkin pie is always delicious, but nearly impossible to find outside of the October through December period. Even pumpkin flavored coffee and muffins vanish.

Another of these hard to get vegetables is sweet potatoes. They have been grown as far north as New Jersey, but really thrive in hot climates. The lightest colored ones are called Jersey sweet potatoes; it appears that deeper the color, the hotter the climate. It is surprisingly simple to produce one's own crop of these delicious roots. Usually, they will succeed in Southern Nevada as long as they are in relatively fertile soil and receive sufficient water. Still they are rarely available except around the time they would be harvested in the Northern Hemisphere – late fall.

Despite being very sweet, they are remarkably healthy. Scientific research indicates that they might even be beneficial in type 2 diabetes. Of course, no one should think about using any vegetable medicinally without medical advice and supervision.

There are several other curious facts about these roots, which leads to confusion. First, please note, they are not “yams”. Yams are very different - an African tuber, starchy and pale, not related to the orange-fleshed sweet potato. If something has the word yam on the label, USDA regulations require that it also contain an identifier calling it sweet potato.

Another fact is that, despite the name, they are not potatoes. Potatoes are related to tomato and eggplant. Sweet potatoes, on the other hand, are closely related to morning glories. The leaves and flowers are very similar.

Some varieties of sweet potatoes are grown, not for their delicious roots but for attractive foliage. Sweet potato vine can be a tender ornamental ground cover in our climate, although our winter chill will kill the aboveground parts. If the plant has become established in a relatively protected site however, it can



Morning Glory

produce new foliage come spring. Technically, they are perennials, but since we dig them up to harvest their roots, that is a moot point.

Although pumpkins and sweet potatoes are actually from South America all three of these very seasonal vegetables are native to the Western Hemisphere. Healthy and delicious, perhaps we should think of them for more than the holiday table.

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