



# SWEET POTATO TALKING POINTS

## 2. A Slice of Sweet Potato history

- Sweet potatoes are believed to have been domesticated in Central and South America nearly 5,000 years ago. They then spread to Mexico, the Caribbean, the West Indies and parts of North America.
- When Christopher Columbus landed on America's shores in 1492, the Native Americans were growing sweet potatoes. Columbus and his men loved the tasty sweet potatoes so much that they brought them back to Europe to grow their own, where they continued to increase in popularity.
- The Spanish began cultivating sweet potatoes immediately. Soon they were profitably exporting sweet potatoes to England where they were included in spice pies to be devoured at the court of Henry VIII.
- The French, not to be outdone, planted them at the request of Louis XV. After his death, the popularity of the sweet potato staggered for 30 years. Finally, the Portuguese carried sweet potatoes to Asia and Africa where they have become an important dietary staple.
- In the United States, the sweet potato was a main source of nourishment for early homesteaders and for soldiers during the American Revolution and Civil War. The Pilgrims and Native Americans even ate sweet potatoes at the first Thanksgiving feast.
- George Washington Carver was an African American who revolutionized Southern agriculture with the development of a crop rotation

method. Born in Missouri in 1864, he studied farming and nutrition and soon began to think of new ways in which farmers could earn more money. He taught other farmers how to alternate the soil-depleting cotton crops with soil-enriching crops such as peanuts, peas, soybeans, sweet potatoes and pecans. By alternating crops, the soil is replenished with nutrients, allowing farmers to re-plant the same land again and again. Carver also created new uses for sweet potatoes. He made about 100 new products from sweet potatoes including flour, ink, starch, synthetic rubber, tapioca, vinegar, a type of glue for postage stamps and 500 shades of textile dye.

## 3. How do Sweet



**Potatoes grow?**

- Sweet potatoes are tropical vegetables and are grown mostly in California and in the southern states (North Carolina, South Carolina, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Texas and Georgia). Hot days and warm nights are important for successful commercial production, which explains why they thrive in the long, hot summers of the South and the West Coast. However, sweet potatoes can be grown wherever there are 150 frost-free days for them to develop.
- Sweet potatoes are propagated from sprouts or vine cuttings called slips. Sprouts are grown from plant stock, of which approximately six to eight bushels are needed to produce enough sprouts to plant one acre of sweet potatoes.
- Sandy, well-drained soil is generally best for sweet potato production. Roots will begin to form in 30 to 45 days and need nitrogen, phosphorus and potash for optimum growth. A mature sweet potato will have four to five roots of varying sizes, but the majority should have a 1¾-inch diameter and be three to nine inches in length. Maturity can be checked by gently lifting the sweet potatoes out of the ground with a shovel and making sure they do not become detached from the vine. If the sweet potato is not mature, then it is necessary to lower it back down and cover with soil.

#### **4. What season do we pick Sweet Potatoes?**

- Sweet potatoes are available all year. The peak seasons are from September to December and then again April and May.

#### **5. Why should we eat sweet potatoes?**

- An excellent source of fiber which keeps you full and balance blood sugar levels.
- A good source of Vitamin B6 which helps build healthy blood cells.
- A source of Vitamin A(from beta carotene)—fights infection, keeps skin healthy, maintain good vision.

#### **6. How do you pick good Sweet Potatoes?**

- Choose firm, dark, dry, smooth sweet potatoes without blemishes. One decayed spot can make the entire sweet potato taste bad, even when cut away.
- Do not store sweet potatoes in the refrigerator — the core will turn hard and develop an unpleasant taste. To keep sweet potatoes fresh, store them in a dry, cool place, like a pantry or garage.
- Do not wash sweet potatoes until you are ready to cook them, as the moisture makes them spoil faster.

#### **Questions to ponder**

**1. What makes the flesh of a sweet potato so orange?** Beta-carotene is one of the orange dyes found in most green leaves, and in carrots. When leaves lose their chlorophyll in the fall, carotene is one of the colors left over in the leaf. Beta carotene has two roles in the body. It can be converted into vitamin A (retinol) if the body needs more vitamin A. If the body has enough vitamin A, instead of being converted, beta carotene acts as an antioxidant which protects cells from damage caused by harmful free radicals

**2. What health functions does Vitamin A provide for our bodies?**

Vitamin A helps our body to grow

normally, makes our eyes and immune system healthy, and supports resistance to infection.

**4. How are sweet potatoes similar to and different from yams?** Sweet potatoes are roots and are moist and sweet. (grown underground as part of the root) Yams are tubers and are dry and starchy.(grown underground from the stem).

#### **Fun Facts**

- A sweet potato is a vegetable that grows underground.
- The sweet potato is not a potato or even a distant cousin. Potatoes are tubers and sweet potatoes are roots.
- A root is actually a root of the plant whereas a tuber, although it grows underground, is a part of the stem of the plant (that grows underground).
- The inside of a sweet potato is orange. Sweet potatoes are in the orange/yellow food group. Can you name other yellow/orange fruits or vegetables? corn, butternut squash, yellow peppers, pumpkin, oranges, tangerines, persimmons and yellow figs
- The orange color tells us that sweet potatoes are full beta-carotene. Beta-carotene comes from plants and changes into vitamin A when you eat it.
- Sweet potatoes have lots of vitamin A. It would take 23 cups of broccoli to provide the same amount of vitamin A as in one medium sweet potato.
- One of the many things vitamin A does for you is help your body grow normally.
- Sweet potatoes also have iron. Iron is an important mineral for your body. When you do not get enough iron from the foods you eat, you might feel more tired than usual.

- The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CPI) has ranked sweet potatoes as the No. 1 most nutritious vegetable.
- When Christopher Columbus landed on America's shores in 1492, the Native Americans were growing sweet potatoes. Columbus and his men loved the tasty sweet potatoes so much that they brought them back to Europe to grow their own.
- Native Americans called sweet potatoes batatas. The Pilgrims and Native Americans ate sweet potatoes at the first Thanksgiving feast. Do you eat sweet potatoes at your Thanksgiving dinner?