

# Sweet potato season

One farm's harvest leads to a 'cure' of fine tubers for the table

*This is a chapter adapted from the book "The Seasons on Henry's Farm: A Year of Food and Life on a Sustainable Farm," by Terra Brockman, published by Agate Surrey, October 2009, and used here by permission. The book takes the reader week by week through all 52 "seasons" of life on a bio-diverse and labor-intensive Illinois farm owned by Brockman's brother.*

In early October, or earlier if frost threatens, Henry drops everything and calls all hands to come help dig up the sweet potatoes.

Before I leave my house to go help with the digging, I watch a hairy woodpecker work away at the already large holes he's made in the dead tree off the north side of the house. He is harvesting, too, using these last warm days to stock up on food for winter — the same as we are — although he packs it on as body fat while we pack it in our freezers, cupboards, basements and storage pit.

Sweet potatoes are warm-season plants,

native to the tropics, and are very sensitive to cold. At soil temperatures below 55 degrees, the tubers will begin to decay. To stave off that decay and promote the development of flavor, we need to get all of the sweet potatoes out of the ground immediately. The sooner they are dug and cured, the better their flavor will be, and the longer they will keep.



This flower reveals the sweet potato's membership in the morning glory family.

So after they are dug, before they are even washed, Henry takes over a room in the apprentices' quarters, spreads tarps over the floor, and puts the sweet potatoes out in a single layer. He then creates tropical conditions in the room (90 degrees and 90 percent humidity — basically a sweet potato sauna) by bringing in a small electric space heater and draping soaked towels and sheets from a clothesline suspended from the ceiling and walls. But it isn't a sauna; it's a cure — a means of preservation. Meats are often cured with smoke or a mixture of salt, sugar and nitrate. Some vegetables are cured by dry air (garlic, onions), and others by high temperature and humidity. Sweet potatoes need this latter cure, which causes the periderm, the skin and layer underneath it, to thicken and reform, healing any bruises or cuts, and triggering the development of enzymes that convert some of the starch in the roots to sugar.

After curing, sweet potatoes can last up to six months if they are stored between 55 and 60 degrees. Any temperature lower than that (your refrigerator, for example) will lead to the same problems caused by the cool autumn soil, namely, rot. On the other hand, storage at the proper temperature actually improves sweet potatoes, as the maltose sugar-creating enzymes continue to work. Some years, our family has had perfect sweet potatoes clear into May — bringing us full circle to when the new slips are in the hoop-house getting ready to be transplanted for the next season's sweet potatoes.

Henry grows many varieties of sweet potatoes, including the classic orange, moist "yam" varieties, such as Beauregard, Georgia Jet and Jewell. Jewell is not quite as moist as the other two, but is extremely productive with a yellow-orange flesh and rich taste. Henry also grows Japanese and Korean varieties, which generally have a purplish skin and a yellow or cream-colored flesh that is much drier, sweeter and more flavorful than the "yam" varieties.



Kris Pirmann, an apprentice on Henry Brockman's farm, harvests sweet potatoes.

Henry and his wife Hiroko's favorite way to cook any kind of sweet potato is in the ash pan of their wood stove, where the wood coals char the skin, making the potato even sweeter and slightly smoky.

Every time I eat one of the Japanese sweet potatoes Henry and Hiroko make this way, I hear the song of the old Japanese yaki-imo (roasted sweet potato) man who walked his cart through the Tokyo neighborhood where I once lived as a child — a plaintive, more or less monotone "Yaaaaa-kiiii-moe, oiiiiishii yaaaa-kiii-mooooe."

His song, and the sweet smoky smell emanating from his cart, often made me turn around in my tracks. The yaki-imo man would carefully choose the perfectly roasted sweet potatoes at the edge of the fire, and put them in a thick paper bag for each customer — making an edible hand-warmer as winter approached.

It turns out that George Washington Carver, director of the Tuskegee Institute, also was a fan of sweet potatoes roasted in wood coals, although I doubt he ever heard the

song or tasted the wares of the yaki-imo man. In November 1936, he published a bulletin entitled "How the Farmer Can Save His Sweet Potatoes, and Ways of Preparing Them for the Table."

Here is his method, which is very similar to that used by Henry and Hiroko (if you don't have a fire handy, simply roast the potatoes in a heavy roasting pan at 375 degrees until easily pierced with a fork):

## Sweet potatoes No. 3, baked in ashes

In this method, the sweetness and piquancy of the potato is brought out in a manner hardly obtainable in any other way.

Cover them with warm ashes to a depth of 4 inches. On top of the ashes, place live coals and hot cinders; let bake slowly for at least 2 hours.

Remove the ashes with a soft brush and serve while hot, with butter.



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The farm grows many varieties of sweets, including the classic "yam" varieties.

## Rosemary roasted sweet potatoes

**Prep:** 25 minutes **Cook:** 30 minutes  
**Makes:** 4 servings

You can roast the sweet potatoes on their own, or make this a root vegetable medley by adding in similar-size pieces of turnips, rutabagas, parsnips, potatoes and/or carrots.

- 4 sweet potatoes, peeled, cut into 1-inch cubes
- 3 to 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh rosemary leaves
- 1/2 teaspoon each: coarse salt, red pepper flakes

**1** Heat oven to 450 degrees. Combine all ingredients in large mixing bowl. Toss with your hands, evenly coating sweet potatoes with oil and rosemary.

**2** Arrange potato slices in single layer on a heavy baking sheet or shallow roasting pan. Roast until tender, about 30 minutes. Serve warm or at room temperature.

## Nutrition information

Per serving: 210 calories, 44% of calories from fat, 10 g fat, 2 g saturated fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 28 g carbohydrates, 2 g protein, 282 mg sodium, 4 g fiber

## What's in a name

Sweet potatoes are indeed sweet, but they are not potatoes. Neither are they true yams. Rather they are a member of the Convolvulus, or morning glory, family. The confusion began when Europeans first encountered sweet potatoes in Haiti in 1492. The fleshy tuber was known by various names, but the one that stuck was the Haitian one, batata. Later, this name was applied to the ordinary potato — another New World crop.

Meanwhile, at about the same time but on the other side of the world, Portuguese slave traders watching Africans digging up a large root asked what it was. The Africans replied to what seemed an inane question by stating the obvious, that it was "something to eat" — nyami in a language of Guinea. So "yam" became an alternate term for sweet potato in British and Portuguese colonies, even though the Africans were not digging up sweet potatoes, but true yams, which are very large, starchy roots of the Dioscorea genus.

To confuse matters further, when soft, orange-fleshed sweet potatoes were introduced in the United States in the mid-20th century, producers and shippers wanted to distinguish them from the lighter colored, drier varieties. To do so, they used the word yam. But "yams" in the U.S. are actually just sweet potatoes with moist texture and orange flesh.

— Terra Brockman