

# Harvesting Sweet Potatoes

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Porto Ricos

Mmm. Thinking about baked sweet potatoes with lots of butter and sage? Or maybe sweet potato pie? It's about time to dig sweet potatoes in Western NC.

## **How do you know when sweet potatoes are ready to dig?**

Check the variety's days to maturity. Beauregard sweet potatoes require only 90 days, O'Henry needs 90-95, and Porto Rico 115-120. If you remember when you planted them, you'll know when they should be ready. Variations in weather and soil may throw this number off by a week or more. Another signal is that the foliage begins to turn yellow. Sweet potato roots will continue to grow until frost kills the vines, so the crucial thing is to get them out before a hard frost (below 29 degrees.)

## **How To Harvest Sweet Potatoes**

When digging, be careful not to bruise or pierce the tubers. The skins are fragile. Even a small wound can cause rapid decay. Push the shovel in about 10" away from the stem of the plant and lift. You will probably find a variety of tuber sizes per plant. Last year we dug one that was at least 7 pounds!

Line containers with rags or other soft material to avoid scratching. Don't store injured roots. Don't wash them yet, wait till they are cured (washing can scratch them). You will damage a few no matter how careful you are, those are the ones to eat first.

Sweet potato flavor and storage quality improves by curing them first. This process converts the starches to sugar.

## **Curing Sweet Potatoes**

To cure, place in a warm, dark, well-ventilated area at 86-90 F with high humidity for 4-10 days. Near a furnace or wood stove will work. To hold in the humidity use perforated plastic bags (the kind that potatoes are sold in), or loosely wrap in grocery bags (you want some of the moisture to be able to escape).

After that wrap them in newspaper and store in a cool but not cold place (55 to 60 degrees), making sure they don't touch. They should keep for several months.