

What's in Season from the Garden State

Biweekly Highlights from Cooperative Extension, a unit of Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station

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Considered a nutritional superfood, sweetpotatoes are rich in carotenoids, vitamin C, potassium, and fiber.



The young leaves and vine tips of sweetpotatoes are widely consumed as a vegetable in SE Asia and West African countries.



Ethnic sweetpotato research plots at the Rutgers Agricultural Research and Extension Center in Upper Deerfield, NJ

I Yam NOT a Yam!

Rick VanVranken, Agricultural Agent, Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Atlantic County

Sweetpotatoes, whether the bright orange, moist-fleshed varieties or the drier Jersey types, are all the same species, *Ipomea batata*, and members of the morning glory family, the *Convolvulaceae*. Their vines and flowers resemble wild morning glories, though they take so long to flower they rarely reach that stage in New Jersey.

The confusion over the word YAM came from the southern colloquialism associating the sweetpotato with the tropical staple yam, *Dioscorea batata*, a starchy, white root vegetable that can only be grown commercially in the very warmest regions of southern California and Florida. However, in the 1940's as the American public was being taught that darker orange and green vegetables had more vitamins and were more nutritious than their paler cousins, the Louisiana Sweetpotato Commission started promoting Southern Yams to distinguish the moist-fleshed, orange types in the marketplace. That term took such a stronghold that the United States Sweetpotato Promotion Council* has been working for almost twenty-five years to disassociate 'sweetpotatoes' from 'yams'.

But you'll confuse a Yankee if you call it a 'tater'.

The sweetpotato is the more traditional staple crop in the South, so much so that if you say you're having potatoes for dinner you're likely referring to sweets, as opposed to white or Irish potatoes. To the north, the white potato is the predominant staple vegetable and northerners drop the white and add sweet to the other to keep from confusing the two. That preference for a drier, starchier texture allowed New Jersey and DelMarVa growers to capture the marketplace with what are now considered 'old fashioned' types of sweets, those with a drier flesh and nutty flavor. The importance of New Jersey's role in the industry was reflected in the names of the sweetpotatoes grown there—Jersey Yellows, Jersey Reds, Jersey Orange—and much to the chagrin of southern growers, they couldn't sell their sweetpotatoes in northern markets until the Jersey supplies were exhausted. Luckily for them, the sweetpotato stores well and could be kept in cool, dry cellars until markets were more favorable.

Today sweetpotatoes are grown on about 1200 acres in the Garden State, less than a tenth of the acreage planted at the peak in the 1950's. While New Jersey shippers maintain a significant control over the northern markets, the demand for Jersey sweets has diminished to a point that there are only a handful of growers even trying to grow those varieties anymore.** New Jersey's sweetpotato production is now mostly the same moist, sweet, orange-fleshed varieties as grown in North Carolina, Louisiana and Mississippi. Adding insult to injury, there are no more 'canners' close enough

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New Jersey Department of Agriculture's Jersey Fresh & Seafood Availability Report

Current:

- Apples
- Arugula
- Baby Arugula & Baby Spinach
- Beets
- Cabbage
- Cilantro
- Collards
- Cucumbers
- Dill
- Eggplant
- Escarole & Endive
- Kale
- Leeks & Green Onions
- Lettuces
- Mint
- Parsley
- Peppers
- Pumpkins



- Butterfish
- Flounder
- Fluke - Nov. 2nd
- Ling
- Lobster
- Monkfish
- Scup (Porgies)
- Skate Wings - Nov. 1st
- Squid
- Sword Fish
- Tilefish - Nov. 1st
- Tuna
- Whiting

Farm Raised Hard Clams & Oysters

- Little-necks/Middle-necks
- Specials
- Cape May Salt
- Oysters
- Delaware Bay
- Oysters



to take the smaller roots, so the only market for culled sweetpotatoes not fit for the fresh market is for hunters to use as deer bait. A few entrepreneurial farmers have also learned that the roots are not the only edible part of the sweetpotato plant. They have been successful in selling the tender young shoots or tips to a number of new ethnic populations that have settled in the Mid-Atlantic region.

**In order to satisfy both the traditionalists who wanted to keep using the word 'yam' and those who favored eliminating it but wanted a better way to distinguish it from white potatoes, the US Sweetpotato Collaborators Group (researchers from sweetpotato growing states that work on improving the crop) proposed combining 'sweet' and 'potato' into a single word. The Promotion Council adopted a resolution in support of the idea in the late 1980's though getting the trade to use the term has been just as hard as getting rid of 'yam'.*

***Pinelands Farm at the Trenton Farmers Market, Hunters Farm Market in Burlington County, and Marlboro Farm Market in Cumberland County still grow old-fashioned Jersey sweets.*

'Tis the Season to Buy Jersey

After the last Halloween pumpkin has been purchased, many people pack away thoughts of their local farms and farm markets until the following spring. But after the jack o'lanterns hit the compost pile, there is still a cornucopia of food coming from New Jersey farms.



The record warm temperatures we've experienced this October have extended the season for Jersey Fresh summer produce by several weeks. They'll be gone very soon, but the last peppers, eggplants, yellow and green squashes, tomatoes and sweet corn are still available at some local farmstands and farm markets. The warm weather delayed the fall greens, which are now in abundance. Expect to find lettuces, Swiss chard, arugula, collards, cilantro and parsley on through Thanksgiving and depending on the weather, some may be available through Christmas, like acorn and butternut squashes, root crops and the hardy greens.

If you want to put Jersey Fresh produce and turkey on your holiday tables, look for farm markets that are open through Christmas and there are a few resources on the web that can help you find what you are looking for:

The Visit NJ Farms website is sponsored by New Jersey Department of Agriculture and Rutgers: <http://www.visitnjfarms.org>.

Local Harvest is a national website that can be searched by state and includes all sorts of local products including obscure items like herbs, teas, organic eggs and poultry: <http://www.localharvest.org>.

Northeast Organic Farming Association of New Jersey's website lists New Jersey's certified organic farms and farms that provide community supported agriculture (CSA's): <http://www.nofanj.org>.

And finally, while there still may be local good fixings for your holiday dinners, you can complete the season with a Jersey Grown Christmas tree. To find a roadside farm market or pick your own farm for Jersey Grown Christmas trees, wreaths or poinsettias, go to the New Jersey Department of Agriculture's website at: <http://www.jerseyfresh.nj.gov>.

Buying in bulk? Whether you are a chef or a corporate events planner, the Landisville Co-op in Vineland, NJ (Cumberland County) is now selling wholesale to the public. Produce can be purchased by the case from their South Jersey facility. They have fall greens available through Thanksgiving (and maybe beyond). Felix Donato will provide interested parties with a weekly availability list (856-697-2271).

Where to find Jersey Fresh? Ask for it where you shop or dine or go to: <http://www.jerseyfresh.nj.gov>

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