



Sweet potatoes from Jamaica – Sonia and Mrs McGhie



Description of area

Mrs McGhie came from Maldon District which is high in the mountains above Montego Bay. The weather is warm and rain falls all year round. Soils are generally fertile, and the biggest climatic challenges to growing are hurricanes.

Background to Sonia and Mrs McGhie

Sonia and Mrs McGhie both came from farming backgrounds in Jamaica and came to the UK in the 1950's to work. They have worked teaching children to grow vegetables with numerous youth projects on Uplands and Stechford allotments in Birmingham for many years.

“Well, sweet potato comes on a vine... like strings... when it grows it grows like into a mountain similar like how you would grow runner beans... on a stick” (Sonia)

Crops grown in the region

Jamaica grows coffee, avocados and bananas for export but local foods grown on the island include yams, breadfruits, plantains, cho-cho, maize, calaloo, drying beans and okra as well as the famous Scotch bonnet chillies.

“We grow a lot of vegetables really, not so much the yam and the breadfruits and things like that, we’d grow lettuce, cucumber, carrots, all those kind of vegetables in the school garden” (Mrs McGhie)

“It’s the fork, the spade and the shovel and everything, you’ve got to dig the site... remember we couldn’t purchase things... so this is why a lot of people are actually fit because you just have to use what you’ve got” (Mrs McGhie).

Growing and using Sweet Potatoes in the UK

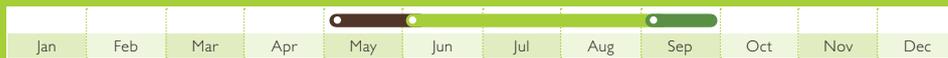
Sweet Potatoes can be grown in the UK but need protection if you live north of Birmingham. They can take up a lot of space when growing; train them up on strings or poles like runner beans. Only a few varieties will reliably produce tubers in the UK. Garden Organic has had reasonable results from Beauregard, O'Henry, Murasaki and Carolina Ruby.

How to grow

Crop details: Half-hardy annual: cuttings or 'slips'.

Time to harvest: 4 months after planting. Grow with anything! Size: medium to large.

Growing timeline: Plant slips indoors on arrival from a seed company or from existing plants when a few inches long earlier in the year. Plant out in a polytunnel, cold greenhouse or coldframe after frosts, when the soil is warm. Harvest tubers as late as possible, but before penetrating frosts, usually around late September.



Plant

Sweet potatoes are grown from 'slips' cuttings of small sprouts which form on the mother potato – a single tuber can produce dozens, and shouldn't be planted but allowed to sprout in a warm place. Carolina Ruby and O'Henry produce sprouts well, but most people will have to buy in slips from a seed company. Put the slips in water overnight then plant individually in 12cm/4in pots and allow to grow on before planting. Space plants 0.5m/18in apart and allow at least 60cm/2ft between rows.

Grow

Sweet potatoes like a fertile soil. Keep them weed-free and water in dry weather. If you want to try growing them outdoors, it's best to plant several slips in a very large pot so that they can be moved indoors if there's a cold night – a single period of chilling during the growing season can stunt their growth so severely that they fail to crop.

Harvest

Sweet potatoes will only start to form tubers when days are shorter than nights. Test by digging cautiously around the plant's crowns. As tubers begin to form, stop watering to allow the leaves to die back. Lift if the foliage is frosted. In order for tubers to store well and develop maximum sweetness they must be 'cured' by exposing them to a high temperature – 26-30C/80-85F for a period of at least 24 hours. In most homes the ideal place to do this is in a box in the airing cupboard.

Cook

Sweet potatoes can be boiled, baked, fried or roasted, but discolour when peeled so need to be dipped in acidulated water once surfaces are exposed to the air.

