



# Harvesting and Cooking Sweet Potato Greens

Sweet potatoes (*Ipomoea batatas*) are more than just tubers – the greens are edible, nutritious, and delicious. The leaves are high in vitamin B, beta carotene, iron, calcium, zinc, and protein.<sup>1</sup> Plant sweet potatoes as you normally would for tuber production and simply include leaf harvests using one of the methods in this factsheet. Sweet potato slips should be planted when the soil has warmed to 65°F (around late May for the DC area) and spaced 12 inches apart.<sup>2</sup>

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## Harvesting Methods

The petioles (i.e., short stalk that connects the leaf blade to the vine) form a “J” shape at the vine. Simply snap the leaf backwards against the “J” to harvest the leaf. The vine is very tough, and most consumers will be interested solely in the leaves. If harvesting throughout the growing season, leave the vine intact on the plant and harvest the leaves that are fully formed with “J”-shaped stems that easily snap when bent backwards. Avoid leaves that are older and discolored. Young leaves and new growth can be harvested as well for a different flavor and texture profile. If harvesting leaves within a week of harvesting tubers at the end of the season, you can take a “clean sweep” approach by cutting the vine from the plant and stripping all leaves. This can be an efficient way to harvest, but you will still need to incorporate a quality control step to remove undesirable leaves. This can be done as you harvest or as you sort and package leaves.

It is important to remember that the greens of the sweet potato are where photosynthesis takes place – the process by which plants create sugars for growth. Reducing photosynthesis will stress the plant and can lead to smaller tubers if greens are over-harvested. Limit heavy harvests that involve stripping most of the leaves or cutting the bulk of the vines to the end of the season.

## Tips for High Quality Leaves

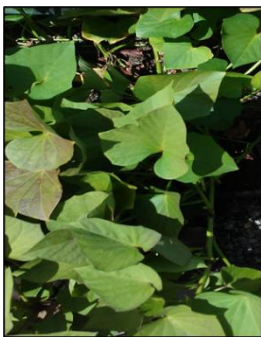
Main factors that may produce unappealing sweet potato leaves are insect damage, disease, and discoloration from weather or nutrient deficiencies. Growing edible greens can mean higher inputs of pesticides and fertilizers than only growing tubers. If growing in a windy area, such as planter boxes on a balcony or green roof, allow sweet potato vines to grow in the box, trail downward, and run along the walking surface, rather than climb up a trellis. Leaves in exposed and windy spots show more discoloration than leaves in protected areas.

## Varieties

Just as tuber shape and color may vary among varieties, so can leaf shape and color. For example, Ginseng sweet potato plants have a striking star-like multi-lobed leaf whereas Georgia Jets have a heart-shaped leaf. You may notice different flavor profiles between varieties as well.

## Cooking Sweet Potato Leaves

Greens are great and simple to cook. Wash the greens, then chop the stems into small pieces and the leafy parts into larger pieces. Start by sautéing the stems so they soften. Add the leafy greens and cook very minimally – just until they start to wilt. Season with salt and pepper. Overcooking the leaves can reduce the nutrient content. Greens are also good lightly steamed or boiled <sup>1,3,4</sup>.



Georgia Jet



A harvest of sweet potato greens



Sweet potato in bloom.

## References

- (1) Islam S. Cooperative Extension Program, University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff.  
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<https://extension.umd.edu/hgic/topics/sweet-potato>
- (3) Dawson B. Horticulture Innovation Lab. University of California, Davis.  
<https://horticulture.ucdavis.edu/blog/cooking-sweet-potato-leaves-for-nutrition>
- (4) Howe L. Horticulture Innovation Lab. University of California, Davis.  
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