

ORIGINS

BOTANY BAY LEARNING RESOURCES

Sweet Potatoes



https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/58/Ipomoea_batatas_006.JPG

Sweet Potato from John Gerard's *Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes* (1597)
<https://archive.org/details/herballorgeneral00gera>

What do Indigenous people call this plant?

The Indigenous Taino use the word 'batata' for what we call 'sweet potatoes'. This is where the English name derives from. The Creek, Taino, Southern Arawak and alternate Panoan name for the sweet potato is 'aho'. Nahua people call them 'camotli'

When was this plant first documented?

Columbus and his crew were the first Europeans to taste sweet potatoes and brought them back to Spain.

How many varieties of this plant are known?

There are more than 6,000 varieties of sweet potato grown world-wide. They have different flavours and different coloured flesh (including red, white, yellow, orange and purple!) Recent DNA testing by botanists from the University of Oxford led by Pablo Muñoz-Rodríguez traced the sweet potato's origin to a plant now called *Ipomoea trifida* that grows around the Caribbean. It has a similar flower but the roots are pencil thin and inedible.

Where and how was the plant originally grown and used?

It was thought that the sweet potato originated in South and Central America and spread to the Polynesian islands before being spread worldwide by Europeans. However, recent DNA testing by botanists from the University of Oxford led by Pablo Muñoz-Rodríguez traced the sweet potatoes origin to a plant now called *Ipomoea trifida* that grows around the Caribbean. It has a similar flower but the roots are pencil thin and inedible.

How do Indigenous people relate to this plant?

Sweet potatoes were first cultivated in what we now call Central and South America about 5,000 years ago. They were grown and eaten much like potatoes. Sweet potatoes were cooked in their skins and served with honey. They were also boiled and mashed and often added to stews as a thickener.

When and how did this plant first come to Britain?

Rumour has it that Henry VIII was introduced to the sweet potato by his Spanish wife, Catherine of Aragon. After his divorce from Catherine, the supply of sweet potatoes from Spain dried up and so it is said that Henry VIII offered land and gold to any gardener who could grow them in Britain.

Special properties

Sweet potatoes are very good for you: they contain vitamin C, manganese, copper, pantothenic acid, vitamin B6, potassium, niacin, vitamin B1, vitamin B2, phosphorus and are a good source of dietary fibre. They also help raise levels of vitamin A and contain antioxidants.

Fun facts

Columbus brought back sweet potatoes to Spain. Europeans referred to the sweet potato and the potato as 'the potato' and it wasn't until after the 1740's that the name sweet potato started being used to distinguish it from white potatoes.

Sweet potatoes were grown in New Zealand before European contact. They had been brought there across the Pacific from the Americas by Polynesian navigators.

Learning Resources edited by Phil Hindmarsh. Project Manager Marine Begault.

BOTANY BAY is a participation and learning project by Border Crossings' ORIGINS Festival, made possible with The National Lottery Heritage Fund. Thanks to National Lottery players, we have been able to engage five schools across the country with the Indigenous heritage of plants, gardens and food.



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