

## **Grow Your own Superfood!**

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Sweet potato or 'uala (Hawaiian) was the second most important staple food crop of the ancient Polynesians, after taro or kalo. Its origin was in Tropical America and it probably got to Polynesia by way of ancient mariners or ocean currents. Today, sweet potatoes are grown worldwide in tropical and sub-tropical areas.

Sweet potato is a hardy vine that prefers to grow in moist, but not flooded soils. Typical growing time is around 4 – 6 months, although this will vary with environmental conditions. The starchy, storage root (root-tuber) is eaten boiled, baked, or fried as chips. Sweet potato roots range in moisture content, shape, and flesh or skin colors. The main types grown in Hawaii are the Okinawan variety with dry, purple-flesh and white-skin, and the Kona B variety with moist, orange-flesh and orange-skin.

As for the claim of being a Superfood, the average sweet potato weighs 6.5 ounces (about 3/4 cup) and contains 180 calories. It supplies 14% of your daily carbohydrate requirement (good carbs) and 26 % of your daily fiber needs. It is an excellent source of vitamins A and C, potassium, calcium, and folate. Purple-fleshed or orange-fleshed varieties are rich in beta carotene and have more anti-oxidants than blueberries. Dr. Oz has labeled the Okinawan purple sweet potato as the #1 Superfood to eat due to its healthful qualities.

In addition, all sweet potatoes have a low glycemic index. This index is a measure of how quickly foods are broken down into sugars in the human body and converted to body fat. High glycemic index foods (such as potato and many baked goods with high amounts of refined sugar) cause blood sugar levels to spike rapidly, followed by an equally rapid decrease (sugar high followed by a sugar low). In contrast, low glycemic index foods (such as sweet potato) release sugar into the blood more slowly, and are recommended for people with diabetes.

In Hawaii, we have the almost perfect climate for growing sweet potatoes. And, it is a relatively easy crop to grow. To get started growing your own sweet potato Superfood, select a location that has at least 6 hours of direct sunshine and soil or compost that is at least 12 inches deep without many rocks. The lack of rocks makes it easier both for the roots to grow and for you to dig up the mature roots. For planting material, you can either start from stem cuttings obtained from friends or from vines grown from the root-tuber itself.

Sweet potatoes can be planted on top of hills, or in flat ground with soil hilled around the plants at about 5 weeks after planting. In Hawaii, the fertilizer recommendation for sweet potatoes is 1 to 2 pounds of 10-20-20 of N-P-K fertilizer per 100 square feet (a row 100 feet long and 1 foot wide). For a more specific fertilizer recommendation and additional information on growing sweet potatoes, commercial growers should contact their Cooperative Extension agent, and home gardeners should contact the Master Gardeners at their nearby Cooperative Extension office. More information on sweet potatoes can be also found at the following webpage <http://www.ctahr.hawaii.edu/hawaii/Vegetable.aspx#potato> .

The major pest of sweet potatoes in Hawaii and around the world is the Sweet Potato Weevil. It feeds on roots, making the root-tubers inedible due to the ugly appearance, bitter flavor, and rotten smell that develop. To control the weevil, it's important to rotate the planting of your sweet potatoes with other crops, and to remove old vines to prevent weevils from

multiplying. Also, a commercial pheromone is available to attract adult males to disrupt their mating and to monitor the pest population in the field.

The most important disease of sweet potato is Black Rot. It is caused by a fungus that can result in complete loss of the crop after harvesting. The fungus can persist in the soil for 1 to 2 years in roots remaining in the field after harvest. As with the Sweet Potato Weevil, the best control method is to rotate your planting of sweet potatoes to once every 3 to 4 years and to remove all sweet potatoes from fields after harvest.

