

*Ipomoea batatas*

[Synonyms : *Aniseia martinicensis* var. *nitens*, *Batatas edulis*, *Convolvulus apiculata*, *Convolvulus attenuatus*, *Convolvulus batatas*, *Convolvulus candicans*, *Convolvulus denticulatus*, *Convolvulus edulis*, *Convolvulus esculentus*, *Convolvulus hederaceus*, *Convolvulus tuberosus*, *Convolvulus varius*, *Ipomoea batatas* var. *edulis*, *Ipomoea catesbaei*, *Ipomoea confertiflora*, *Ipomoea davidsoniae*, *Ipomoea denticulata*, *Ipomoea edulis*, *Ipomoea fastigiata*, *Ipomoea pandurata* var. *cuspidata*, *Ipomoea purpusii*, *Ipomoea setifera*, *Ipomoea vulsa*]

**SWEET POTATO** is a trailing succulent perennial vine. Native to South and Middle Americas it has dark-throated, pink, purple or white flowers.

It is also known as *Bataatti* (Finnish), *Ba-tala* (Singhalese), *Batat* (Danish, Swedish), *Batata* (Italian, Portuguese), *Batata Doce* (Portuguese), *Batate* (German), *Batateprunkwinde* (German), *Batato* (Esperanto), *Bombay* (Arabic), Brazilian arrowroot, *Chelagada* (Telugu), *Fan shue* (Chinese), *Huwi boled* (Sundanese), Jalap tops, *Kapakalenga* (Malayalam), *Keladi* (Malay), *Keledek* (Javanese), *Khoai lang* (Vietnamese), *Kokotino* (Twi), *Kumala* (Fijian, Tongan), *Kumara* (Maori), *Lal alu* (Bengali), *Man thet* (Thai), *Mirio* (Kikuyu), *Mithu alu* (Hindi), *Patata* (Spanish), *Patate* (French), *Patate douce* (French), *Povijnice batátová* (Czech), *Povijnice jedlá* (Czech), *Povojnica batátová* (Slovak), *Shakarai-valli-kizhangu* (Tamil), *Shakarkand* (Hindi, Punjabi), *Sikwar dinich* (Ethiopian), *Sötpotatis* (Swedish), *Süsse Kartoffel* (German), Sweet potato vine, Tuberous-rooted bindweed, *Ubi keledek* (Malay), 'Uala (Hawaiian), 'Umala (Samoan), *Vel-kelengu* (Tamil), and Yam.

Warning – livestock have been poisoned by being fed on rotting tubers, and the leaves and stems are also believed to be poisonous if fed in large quantities.

*Batatas* is a Caribbean (especially Haitian) Indian common name for 'sweet potato'.

From South America where the swollen tuberous roots of the sweet potato provided a staple food for hundreds of years before Europeans set foot there (archaeological evidence shows that the wild plant must have been eaten from at least 8000 BC and that it was being cultivated widely in Peru from at least 750 BC). It was only after the Spanish incursions in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries that it crossed the Atlantic to Africa with the Portuguese traders. Earlier Christopher Columbus (1451-1506), the Spanish sponsored Genoese explorer, was served them in the West Indies and on his second voyage in 1494 the fleet's doctor, Chanca, also mentioned them on his return home – and from the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century it featured as one of the staple foods on board Spanish ships. Apparently there is one authority that suggests that sweet potato plants brought back to Spain by Columbus were planted and were giving successful crops in 1493. Whether this is correct or not historians are certain that within a short time of the Columbus expeditions sweet potato was growing happily in Spain.

When it arrived in Europe the sweet potato was thought to have aphrodisiac qualities and according to some authorities it was eventually to become a favourite of the French Sun King, Louis XIV (1638-1715). Louis XV (1710-1774), who succeeded his great-grandfather in 1715 when he was only five, is said to have developed a fondness for them as he grew up – but the plants, well cared for during his lifetime, became botanical

curiosities upon his death. Then Napoleon's wife, Joséphine de Beauharnais (1763-1814), who came from Martinique, had vines sent to her from there and these were planted at Malmaison. Apart from these occasions however sweet potato is said to have had little further impact on northern France.

They were available in Britain in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century and Henry VIII (1491-1547) is said to have enjoyed eating them in a sweetly spiced pie. At that time sweet potato was not only welcomed for aphrodisiacal qualities similar to those of sea-holly (*Eryngium maritimum*) but also according to some authorities for its sweetness in a period when honey was scarce and sugar still out of reach for a large part of the populous. Historians suspect that the tubers initially arrived in the Country via Spain and that the first time they were imported direct was in 1564 when Sir John Hawkins (1532-1595), the famous English navigator and naval commander, had returned home with sweet potatoes as part of his cargo.

Certainly William Shakespeare (1564-1516) must have believed his audiences would appreciate the implications of references made to the vegetable both in *Troilus and Cressida*

How the devil Luxury, with his fat rump and potato-finger, tickles  
these together!

and by Falstaff in the *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

..... Let the sky rain potatoes; let it thunder to the tune of "Green  
Sleeves"; .....

However in Europe as a whole (including Britain) any initial enthusiasm for sweet potato seems to have dissipated quite rapidly and only re-emerged towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

Meanwhile back across the Atlantic, like Indian tribes around them (records show for instance that both Seminole and Cherokee tribes ate the tubers as a vegetable), the early North American settlers in Virginia began to cultivate the sweet potato too from about 1650. The English colonists among them were so taken by the vegetable that they made it a feature of one of their national dishes in their new homeland in the South. It also became familiar to the Negro slaves for whom it was to form a significant part of their diet. Sweet potatoes were destined to become one of the traditional ingredients of soul food – although further north their popularity was relatively short-lived as in Europe. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century the American botanist and scientist, George Washington Carver (c.1860-1943), claimed that he had found 100 uses for sweet potato (as he had also found 300 for peanuts, *Arachis hypogaea*). He particularly encouraged its growth (and that of peanuts) among the poor black farmers who battled with the depleted soil left from the old Southern cotton plantations (*Gossypium*) with varying degrees of success. Then amazingly the University of Maryland attempted to promote a sweet potato ice cream but the sweet potato growers were not impressed. All these promotional efforts seem in the end to have had little effect. Even in the South today enthusiasm for the sweet potato is said to be waning gradually.

The sweet potato's progress around the world has given botanists and other academics much 'food for thought'. From southern Europe it is believed by some authorities to have spread rapidly south and eastwards reaching the Pacific Islands, the East Indies, India and China. Others have wondered whether (despite linguistic evidence) it was introduced far earlier to the Pacific Islands by the Peruvians who were creditable sailors. The only known archaeological remains of sweet potato have been found in Peru. However earlier migration of this plant other than at the hands of the Europeans is indicated for some authorities by the timing of its appearance in New Zealand. A large body of opinion would now appear to subscribe to the view that it was introduced to New Zealand by the

Polynesians long before European settlers sailed in as it had by then become established as an important part of the Maori diet. This theory receives much support from the expeditions made by the Norwegian anthropologist, Thor Heyerdahl (1914-2002), particularly that in 1947 on his raft *Kon Tiki* when he made his successful passage from Peru to the Tuamato Islands near Tahiti.

At least one Maori legend describes its arrival in the country. It is told that towards the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century sweet potatoes came to New Zealand with a man named Taukata from one of the more northerly and warmer Pacific Islands. The Maoris learnt from him that the tubers would need to be protected from Winter cold and concluded that any practical arrangements required the support of a powerful 'guardian'. Who better to fill this role than the knowledgeable Taukata. He was killed, his skull preserved and his blood sprinkled over the doorframe to the storehouse. At the annual planting Taukata's skull would be dressed with feathers and left in the fields to guard the crop and, after harvest, the head would be returned to the storehouse to perpetuate Taukata's protective influences for the Winter.

The Polynesians are also said by many to have introduced sweet potato to Hawaii.

It is believed by some authorities that the sweet potato was introduced to North America by Europeans, although others subscribe to its more likely gradual migration northwards from Mexico. In any event it is now a traditional vegetable there and to add to confusion can sometimes be referred to as 'yam', although the sweet potato and the yam (*Dioscorea*) are both separate and unrelated plants. North American yam cultivation however is far exceeded by that of China, followed by Africa, and then Asia generally. Japan and Taiwan, are understood to grow it as 'typhoon insurance' for which the plants would be available if standing crops were to be devastated – and also for alcohol. In addition it is interesting to note that although Japan's harvest is much reduced and cannot attempt to match China's output, she still produces 3 times more than the North American sweet potato harvest.

The foregoing only makes reference to the tubers that authorities now declare are more nutritious than potato (*Solanum tuberosum*). In Africa and some other areas the leaves have also provided a vegetable when cooked like spinach (*Spinacia oleracea*).

In the international 'biomass' programmes that have been introduced particularly in many Third World countries (aimed at achieving a self-sufficiency in energy production), sweet potatoes are one of the plant materials that are being used.

Sweet potato provides cattle fodder.