



PRODUCE NOTES

November 15, 2007

How Sweet It Is

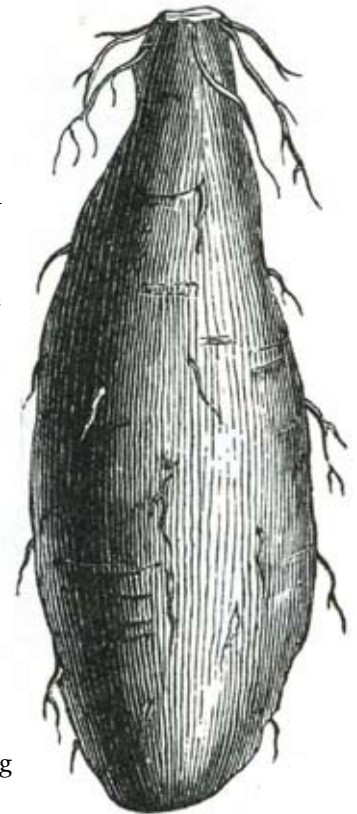
The sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*) is native to the Andes Mountains in Peru and Colombia. Its part in human history dates back 10,000 – 12,000 years, when it was recorded in Peruvian art, carvings and murals. The sweet potato is one of the very oldest cultivated vegetables.

To follow the travels of the sweet potato around the globe is to follow the routes of the conquistadors. Columbus is credited for taking sweet potatoes from the New World to Spain and introducing them there. They quickly became fashionable among the European nobility, and King Henry VIII had them imported from Spain to England for his enjoyment. During the 1700's, sweet potatoes were carried by the Spanish to the Philippines and Guam, and to Africa, India and Southeast Asia by the Portuguese. By the end of that century, China had gotten them from the Philippines, and from China sweet potatoes traveled to Japan, where they are now the third largest crop, and where country vendors sell hot sweet potatoes from carts in the winter.

Sweet potatoes are deeply embedded in American history and culture. In the United States during slavery, sweet potatoes became an important food for African slaves, who grew them (together with peanuts, okra, lima beans, rice, black eyed peas and other crops) to supplement the often inadequate amounts of food they were given by slave holders.

Post-Civil War, Southern fields had been almost destroyed by cotton mono cropping. George Washington Carver, the famous African American agronomist, botanist, and agricultural chemist urged Southern farmers to plant peanuts, soybeans and sweet potatoes to rehabilitate the soil and the economy. Sweet potato cultivation increased tremendously, and sweet potatoes became a staple of the Southern American diet. In Laura Schenone's book, *A Thousand Years Over a Hot Stove: A History of American Women Told Through Food, Recipes and Remembrances*, there is a sweet potato pie recipe dating back to 1881. It was written by Abby Fisher, a former slave, a renowned chef, and the first former slave we know of to have written a cookbook.

Although sweet potatoes are delicious baked into spiced, creamy sweet potato pie, roasted and topped with sour cream, butter, and salt, or as a sweet casserole with brown sugar and marshmallows, the naked sweet potato is actually an ultra-low fat nutritional powerhouse, high in vitamins A and C, B6, iron, potassium, and fiber! However you like them best, we hope you will heartily enjoy your sweet potatoes—along with your winter holidays—this year.



- Dani Yamamoto

for more information about sweet potatoes, see the November 20, 2001 issue of **Produce Notes**, at veritablevegetable.com

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Sweet Potato Varieties

Rachel Vanderwerff, our sweet potato purchaser, has a handy guide to sweet potato varieties for us:

Garnet: With their deep red-to-purple skins and classic moist, orange flesh, Garnets are our best-selling sweet potato variety.

Jewel: Copper-skinned and orange-fleshed, these are another well-loved classic sweet potato type.

Hannah: These have a beige skin and cream-colored flesh. They have a mild, nutty flavor.

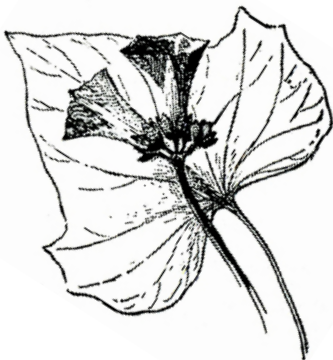
Japanese: With pink to purple skins and light-colored flesh, these sweet potatoes have a drier texture than the others, and a sweet flavor often compared to that of chestnuts.

All delicious organic sweet potatoes we carry, from Lil's Best and Courthouse/AV Thomas, are grown in California's Central Valley.

You Say Sweet Potato: I Say Yam...

In the United States, we often use the terms “sweet potato” and “yam” interchangeably. The true yam (genus *Dioscorea*) is a large tuber, native to Africa, which contains more starch and less sugar than a sweet potato. It’s not very sweet, and can grow enormous—up to 100 lbs! The word *yam* came from several African words meaning “something to eat”, including *njam* in Gullah and *nyami* in Wolof (Senegal). Rarely do we see true yams in the United States. Everything we call “yams” are actually sweet potatoes!

The true yam and the sweet potato are very different plants, so how did we come to interchange the words? One theory is that when African slaves in the US began to grow sweet potatoes, they referred to them as *nyami* or “something to eat”. Also, the original sweet potatoes grown in the United States were the white-fleshed varieties. When orange-fleshed sweet potatoes were first introduced into the Southern US in the mid-1900’s, producers wanted to distinguish them from the white-fleshed sweet potatoes, and called them “yams”.



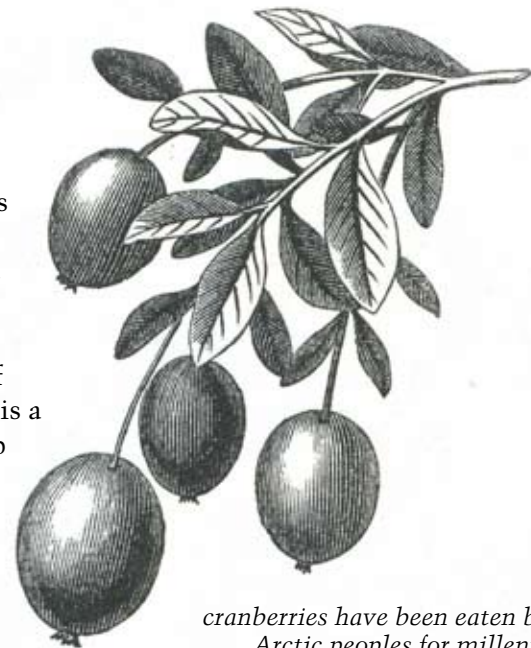
The Cranberry is a Native American Jewel!

Cranberries are one of the very few North American indigenous fruits (blueberries and Concord grapes are two others). They are native to the cooler Northern climates, and grow well in the Northeast, Washington, parts of Oregon, and Canada. The plant is a slender, trailing evergreen shrub that grows in acidic, sandy soil. Native Americans used the cranberry’s jewel-red juice as dye for cloth, and mixed dried, ground berries with meat and fat to make *pemmican*, a preserved meat jerky which sustained them through the long, snowy winters; the benzoic acid in the berries is a natural preservative.

In 1620, when European settlers came to North America, cranberries grew wild in abundance. Dutch and German settlers named the fruit “crane berry” because the stem, calyx, and pink petals of the flower resembled the head and bill of a crane, and cranes would wade delicately in the bogs on their slender legs and eat the berries. It’s not 100% certain that cranberries were served at the first Thanksgiving feast, but it could very well be true.

Today, cranberries are certainly one of the most beloved traditional Thanksgiving foods, both in the United States and in Canada (Canadians celebrate Thanksgiving on the second Monday in October). In addition to its symbolism and history, cranberry sauce is satisfyingly piquant when paired with rich, roasted turkey.

I think many of us grew up eating jellied cranberry “sauce” that slid from a can in one gelatinous mass; I know I did! It’s easy to make your own much-more-delicious cranberry sauce with fresh organic cranberries. The most basic recipe calls for 2 cups fresh cranberries (rinse them and pick through them first), 1 cup sugar, and $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of water. Combine all the ingredients in a saucepan and simmer over medium heat. As they heat, the berries will “pop” their skins. Stir and simmer till sauce is thickened; it takes less than 10 minutes. Of course, all sorts of flavors are great with cranberry—ginger, allspice, chopped toasted pecans, orange rind or a splash of orange juice are all terrific additions to your basic sauce. Please do share your favorite recipe with us!



cranberries have been eaten by Arctic peoples for millenia

- Dani Yamamoto

