

## Sweet Potato Harvest

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Freezing temperatures kill sweet potato vines, instantly turning them black with slightest freeze or frost. After the vines are lost, roots will not increase or improve. In fact, sweet potato roots need to be harvested before the root temperature drops below 50 degrees for a prolonged period.

Because they are insulated by the soil, sweet potato roots are usually not injured by the first freeze that kills the tops, but you should begin digging them soon after. When digging sweet potatoes be careful not to scratch or scuff the surface. This creates potential places for rotting, and is the reason many commercial sweet potato growers handle roots with cloth gloves. Gently pull or cut the roots from the vines, and place them in ventilated boxes or baskets. Storing them in a warm, humid location for 7 to 10 days encourages a curing process. During this time the roots develop a compound called suberin that forms a 'second skin' over the surface scratches and allows the roots to be stored for many months in good condition. It also converts starches to sugars and gives the roots a much better flavor and texture.

Cure roots in a small room or closet where you have placed a space heater to warm temperatures to 80-85ø F. Maintain high humidity by placing some pans of water or damp towels in the room. After 7-10 days of curing, move the sweet potatoes to a cooler location but not too cold. Sweet potatoes need to be stored above 50ø F to prevent a chilling injury which results in darkening of the roots, a rapid increase in respiration, and increased susceptibility to rotting.

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