

Sweet Potato Farming



February 22 is National Cook a Sweet Potato Day, and we wanted to recognize the fact that Arkansas is one of the country's top producers of these healthy, delicious vegetables. Records from the Arkansas Department of Agriculture show that farmers in eight counties grew sweet potatoes on 5,000 acres in 2017, a crop valued at approximately \$26 million. That places the Natural State at number six on the list of the nation's top producers.

One thing you might not know is that a sweet potato is not a potato at all. It's actually a member of the morning glory family, and the parts we eat are the roots of the plant. True potatoes, like the russet or red ones you get at the grocery, are members of the nightshade family, and the edible part is a tuber, which is an underground part of the stem.



You also may be unaware of some foods, drinks and other products made with sweet potatoes. You have probably tried candied sweet potatoes or sweet potato pie with a holiday meal. Sweet potato fries have become increasingly popular, too, and baby foods made with sweet potatoes have been around for decades.



But many products made with sweet potatoes are much less familiar, including these.

Baked goods

Sweet potatoes can be dried and processed to make a slightly sweet flour that is gluten free, high in fiber and full of nutrients. The flour can be used to make a variety of baked goods, including breads, biscuits, cookies, muffins, pancakes, crepes, cakes and doughnuts. It also can be used in soups, as a thickener for sauces and gravies, and in breading for fish.

Pet food

Manufacturers often add sweet potatoes to dog food and dog treats because the potatoes are gentle on a dog's digestive system, naturally gluten-free, low in fat and provide important vitamins and minerals essential for a dog's vision, growth and muscle strength. Canines that require grain-free diets are often fed sweet-potato-based foods because the added "yams" provide an alternative source of carbohydrates.

Some dry and wet cat foods also contain small amounts of sweet potato to provide additional carbs and nutrients in the animals' diet.

Chips

Health-conscious shoppers who can't resist snacks are driving a growing market for sweet potato chips as an alternative to regular potato chips. A Google search turned up 10 companies making sweet potato chips in organic, fat-free and sugar-free versions and flavors as diverse as Cinnamon & Sugar, Chipotle, Barbecue and Salt & Vinegar.

Crackers

Dozens of companies are coming out with their own versions of sweet potato crackers, too. These sometimes contain other healthy vegetables, too, like kale, broccoli and carrots, and most are marketed as gluten free and organic.

Soup

Sweet potatoes are popular soup ingredients in countries all over the world, so it's no surprise you can find a wide variety of heat-and-eat soups available online and at the supermarket. Some might seem a bit unusual for most tastes: Sweet Potato & Chia Soup, for example, or Sweet Potato & Butternut Squash Sipping Soup. There's also Sweet Potato Chili, Sweet Potato Corn Chowder and a trendy vegan food called Sweet Potato Detox Soup made with coconut milk, dried tomatoes, peanuts and herbs.

Breakfast cereal

If your bowl isn't full of sweet potato soup, maybe you'll want to fill it with some sweet potato breakfast cereal, touted by some as a gluten-free "superfood" to get your day started right. Several versions are made especially for babies, but there are also sweet potato flakes and a hot cereal with sweet potatoes, quinoa and raisins for more adult tastes.

Children's snacks

Concerned parents love giving their kids snacks that have healthy sweet potatoes as one of the main ingredients. Sweet potato yogurt is a favorite (often with added fruits such as blueberries), but there are also sweet potato puffs, sweet potato fruit/veggie strips, sweet potato cookies, sweet potato/fruit squeeze pouches and even sweet potato teething wafers.

Alcoholic beverages

When you realize that vodka can be made from regular potatoes, it's no surprise to learn that sweet potato vodka is available, too. There's also a unique sweet potato liqueur made with a delicious aged blend of brown sugar, spices and extracts. And sweet potato researchers at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff are working with a company to produce and market a sweet potato wine.

Miscellaneous



We found a few additional sweet potato products that didn't seem to fit other categories. Take sweet potato butter, for example. Several companies make this old-fashioned favorite, which can be spread on your favorite bread, toast or biscuits just like jelly or jam. And there's a powdered nutrition supplement made from sweet potatoes you can use to increase the health benefits of smoothies, yogurts and other foods.

Our Asian friends make sweet potato vermicelli, too, a noodle often eaten as part of a soup dish, stir fry or salad, and purple sweet potato vinegar, a deep-crimson alternative to red wine vinegar that brightens sauces, salads, dressings, pickles and sushi rice.

Finally, if you want to try creating your own sweet-potato-flavored dishes, you can purchase machinery to make liquid or powdered sweet potato extract, adding just a little bit to your favorite recipe will enhance its aroma and taste. Bon appétit!