

Sweet Potatoes

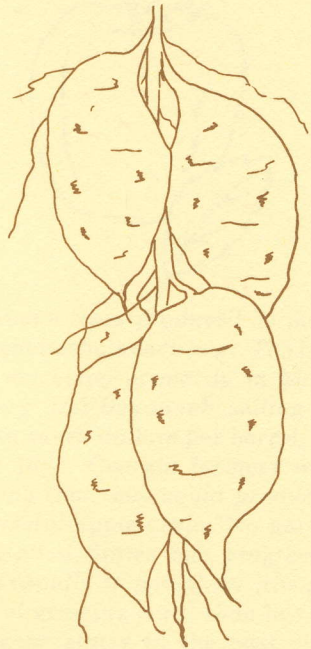
Sweet potatoes are one of Georgia's oldest crops and rank among the state's top moneymaking vegetables. In fact for approximately 100 years (1836-1936), Georgia led the nation in sweet potato production, at one time devoting over 150,000 acres to the crop.

The first settlers learned about this "buried treasure" through the Indians who were growing sweet potatoes when they arrived in Georgia. Early farmers planted sweet potatoes on raised ridges. The crop usually was from vines cut from older plants and planted following corn in July.

After the sweet potato crop was harvested, the fields were often used as grazing for hogs. Georgia farmers cured their sweet potato harvest in a two-foot-long, oblong pit lined with corn stalks and covered with a lean-to roof. Sweet potatoes were placed on top of the stalks and covered with rice straw or additional corn stalks. The pit was then covered with soil to protect the vegetables from rain and frost. An opening was usually left in the pit to allow for ventilation.

Around 1776, a crudely processed form of sweet potato meal was exported from Savannah to England. A statesman during this period claimed that if sweet potatoes could be shipped to Europe without spoilage, the crop would be equal to cotton as an export product.

Census figures for 1850 and 1860 ranked Georgia first in sweet potato production. Production continued to increase during the Civil War years. Vegetable production was encouraged during this period as a



means of preventing scurvy. The sweet potato soon came to be known as the "staff of life" in the War diet. It was served baked, fried, roasted and even as pudding or pie for dessert.

The canning industry soon began to take advantage of the state's sweet potato crop. By 1909, small commercial quantities of sweet potatoes were being canned and by 1920 the industry had more than doubled.

Although acreage has decreased over the years, sweet potatoes are still considered one of Georgia's leading vegetable crops.