November Tips

By Amy Ivy

Sweet Potatoes

One of the hot crops to grow right now is sweet potatoes. We used to assume we couldn’t grow them well this far north but not so! You need to start with slips which are rooted pieces of the tuber, and grow them on black plastic mulch, but otherwise it can be done even in our region.

Unlike potatoes, sweet potatoes prefer warmer weather. They need 100 frost-free days to fully develop and the black plastic mulch not only helps keep weeds down, it warms the soil to help them get off to a good start. Raised beds will also help since the soil dries out and warms up more quickly in spring.

There are many varieties of sweet potato available through mail order and one of the best for our region is ‘Beauregard’. For more information on how to grow sweet potatoes visit http://gardening.about.com/od/vegetables/p/Sweet-Potatoes.htm

If you bought some sweet potatoes this fall, they can keep for a few months in storage if given the proper conditions. Sweet potatoes like it a little warmer than regular potatoes; try to store them at 55-60 degrees whereas potatoes keep longest around 40 degrees. Do not store either kind in your refrigerator.

Yams or Sweet Potatoes?

What’s the difference? If you want to win some points at your next trivia contest or dinner party conversation, here’s the scoop. Yams are a tropical plant closely related to lilies and grasses. They are mostly grown in Africa. Sweet potatoes are in the morning glory family and grow like a vine, creeping over the soil, forming a dense mat of foliage.

According to this site from the Library of Congress (http://www.loc.gov/rr/scitech/mysteries/sweetpotato.html), yams are starchier and drier than sweet potatoes. There are two types of sweet potatoes, firm and soft. In the United States, the firm types were commercially grown first. When the soft types began to be grown, the African slaves called them yams since they were more like the softer yams in Africa. So the soft types of sweet potato began to be called yams to distinguish them from the firm types. No wonder we’re confused!

Now the USDA requires labels with the term ‘yam’ to also say ‘sweet potato’. Unless you’re shopping in an international market, you’re most likely eating sweet potatoes.

Cover the Ground

I like to cover any bare garden soil for the winter. It helps prevent erosion from wind, rain and heavy run-off, it blocks some of the cold season weeds and it contributes organic matter to the soil. It’s too late for a living cover crop, but go ahead and rake some fallen leaves or an inch layer of grass clippings over any exposed garden soil this month.
Last Minute Fall Chores

- It’s not too late to get a raised bed set up for early planting next spring.
- Check your cupboards, drawers and garden shed for leftover seeds from this year. I use a quart sized canning jar to store any extra or half empty seed packets, and any other seeds I’ve saved. Keep this jar, with its top tightly closed, at the back of your refrigerator for the winter where the temperature will stay constantly cool.
- Garlic and onions keep best at room temperature with lots of good air circulation. Do not store these in your refrigerator.
- There’s still time to plant garlic as long as you get to it soon. Late October is ideal, but the first week of November should be fine, too.
- Now is an ideal time to plant spring flowering bulbs, any time up until the ground freezes. You can often find good sales on them this time of year.
- Gather seed pods, flower stalks, pine cones, berries, grape vines and any other interesting materials now, to add to a grape vine or evergreen wreath later this fall. A glue gun makes quick work of attaching these natural decorations.